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POCKET NOVELS



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The Lone Chief.

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THE LONE CHIEF;

OR,

THE TRAPPERS OF THE SASKATCHEWAN.

A TALE OF THE LONG TRAIL.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING POCKET NOVELS:

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THE LONE CHIEF.

CHAPTER I.

THE OMAHA CHIEF.

"GE-THUNDER! boys, look down yender!" and the speaker instinctively sheltered his body behind a scrubby pine bush, though keeping his gaze riveted upon the sight that had called forth the exclamation.

"Indians—and coming this way!"

"Looks mighty like they was runnin' a foot-race—don't it? They kiver the crust mighty peart, now I tell yeou!"

"If a foot-race, the stake is a big one—see, now! A dirty trick, that—seven to one, and they using arrows!"

"Boys, fa'r play's a jewel. Shell we or not?" muttered the first speaker, his gray eyes sparkling vividly.

"Le's lend him a hand," promptly replied two—but the third man spoke more deliberately.

"'L it pay tew dew that? Git the heathen imps down on us, an' whar'll our pelts be?"

"To the devil with such scruples," angrily cried one of the younger men. "Lead the way, Kit—there's no time to lose if we would reach the bed before they pass by."

"Step lively—round this p'int," and the old man glided rapidly down the hillside.

Since the parties thus introduced will figure prominently in the pages to follow, an explanation will not be amiss. They were four in number, stout, hardy and well-armed, all native-born Americans, though we find them many miles north of the line that divides the United States from the British possessions.

Their garb was peculiar, consisting for the most part of rudely tanned skins, with the hair and fur still on. Brimless caps of fur covered their heads, long flaps of the same

material meeting beneath the chin, to protect their ears from the fierce biting breath of winter. Their faces were unshorn; even the youngest of the party could boast of no mean crop of beard, mustache and whiskers.

One circumstance gave them a ludicrous appearance, as though partially dressed for a masquerade. Beneath each eye was an oblong patch of black—as dark as moistened powder could render the skin. Yet these spots were quite as much a portion of their dress as the buffalo moccasins, or deer-skin *wammus* that clothed their bodies. Half a day without these *ornaments*, and the trappers would have become ‘snow-blind.’

Of the quartette, one was old, one nearly middle-aged; the other two young. That they were trappers, the skin pouch containing “medicine,” bait, etc., hanging at their backs, the few “open links” and small but sharp hatchets secured to their belts, plainly evidenced.

Christopher Duncan, or “Old Kit” as he was more generally known, had for nearly two-score years, man and boy, been a trapper, part of the time as hired hand, then a “captain,” and afterward as a free trapper. At the present time he might be considered the leader of this party—since he was the only one of the quartette that had seen service, or knew aught of the country.

Next in age, Samuel Grimes, or “Yankee Sam,” all the way from Jersey; cool, calculating, but of unquestioned bravery, as had often been proved during the “late unpleasantness.”

Fred Mitchell and Alfred Hall, adopted sons of “Bleeding Kansas,” were both tall, handsome, manly fellows, who, though barely twenty-five years of age, had won their shoulder-straps in Southern fields. All four being in the same regiment—the 7th Kansas Cavalry—a sincere friendship soon sprung up between them, and when they doffed the blue, it needed but one season of inactivity to disgust them, so that Old Kit found eager listeners when he proposed a trip to the Saskatchewan, where we now find them.

Meeting after their regular morning rounds, our friends were returning to camp, when they paused upon a hilltop. From here an extensive view was opened before them. The

Saskatchewan, now ice-bound and thickly covered with snow frozen almost as hard as rock, wound its way below them, fringed with dark, somber pines and evergreens.

Along the river bed, racing toward them, Old Kit had discovered a number of Indians dashing on at full speed. Perhaps fifty yards in advance ran one savage, his body naked from the waist upward, a long bow in his hand. Running nearly in a body, seven others appeared in full pursuit.

The keen eye of the trapper had noted the fugitive turn his head twice, to glanced at his pursuers, and he knew by that the race was well-nigh ended. An ardent lover of fair play, he resolved to lend the fugitive a helping hand, regardless of the consequences, though he might well have hesitated.

At this time the Cree Indians—both of the Wood and Plain tribes—were professedly at peace with the whites, though woe be unto the weak party that trusted in the honor of the Plain Crees, proverbially cruel and treacherous. A moment's reflection would have told Kit that to shed the blood of a Cree would render immediate flight to the settlements their only hope of escaping the vengeance of the others; but that moment he did not take.

Not a moment too soon did the trappers gain the edge of the river-bed, their weapons ready for use. As they crouched down under cover, the hunted savage was nearly abreast of them.

He ran heavily and with difficulty. The pursuers were rapidly closing upon him. Casting another glance over his shoulder, he plucked an arrow from the quiver at his back and fitted it to the taut string.

"Ready, boys," muttered Old Kit, cocking his rifle. "See the arrer stickin' in his haunch—he cain't run much further. Take turns in shootin', jest as we squat. 'Twon't do to let any one o' the imps git away."

"Thunder—look! a man, if he is an Indian!" and Mitchell's eyes flashed with admiration.

The hunted savage had suddenly faced his pursuers, sinking upon one knee, with notched arrow drawn to his ear. With exultant yells his enemies abruptly separated, still dashing on as though bent on surrouding their victim.

The bow-string twanged sharply—like a flash of lightning the feathered shaft sped upon its mission. Full in the broad chest of an Indian the arrow quivered, its barbed point shining blood-red at his back.

Wild and shrill arose the death-yell, awaking horrible echoes in the hills and dense forests. Staggering forward a few steps, the stricken brave sunk to the snow-crust, dyeing its pearly surface with his life-blood.

Clear and piercing, like the eagle's shriek, the hunted Indian pealed forth his defiant war-cry, and then plucked another arrow from his quiver. With angry howls the others came bounding on.

"*Now !*"

Blended with his shout, the rifle of Old Kit cracked spitefully, and death choked the yell of rage upon the Indian's lips. Then, quietly succeeding each other, the weapons of the trappers spoke, directed by true and unerring hands and eyes.

The first report came like a thunder-clap from a clear sky to the savages. They instantly paused, seeming petrified with astonishment.

The fugitive turned quickly toward the ambush, his eyes directed by the rising wreath of smoke. Desperate despair was written upon his features. He believed he was caught between two fires.

But then, as the death-yell rung welcome on his ear, and he found that the masked shots were not aimed at his person, the notched shaft fell from his fingers, his head drooped, and he fell in a motionless heap upon the snow-crust, seemingly dead.

Each rifle-shot claimed a victim; at such short range the result could not have been otherwise, for these men were not unused to drawing bead upon armed foemen. Five bleeding forms cumbered the snow.

"Hi—yah!" yelled Old Kit, springing through the bushes, drawn revolver in hand, as the two surviving red-skins turned to flee from the scene of death. "A'ter 'em, boys—'f they git away, good by to our pelts an' skulps!"

One fugitive took the back trail, evidently trusting in his powers of locomotion to carry him to safety. But no mean

pedestrian was upon his tracks. Old Kit was noted for his fleetness of foot and powers of endurance, nor had age sapped these. That one calculated upon a long run, while the other meant a short brush, was evident from their style of running.

The savage ran with the long, swinging stride of a man wearing snow-shoes, swaying first to one side then the other. Old Kit stepped short and quick, his toes scraping particles from the frozen crust, casting them in little spurts behind him. At every rod he uttered the wild slogan of his company when they charged the foe—the first syllable short, the second long: *Hi—yah! hi—yah!*

Scarce two hundred yards had been covered, when he abruptly paused and raised his right hand. *Crack—crack!* With a blood-curdling screech the savage bounded high into the air, falling headfirst to the crust, breaking through, casting the feathery snow in clouds upon the cold air in his death-struggles.

Old Kit turned and glanced back. Alf Hall was hastening toward him. Mitchell was stooping over the form of the Indian they had risked so much to save from death. But nothing could be seen of either Yankee Sam or the last savage.

“Whar is he—the other varmint?” eagerly cried Duncan.

“He took to the woods, with Sam after him,” panted Alf.

“Satan! ’f he gits off, the hull Cree tribe ’ll be on our backs,” gritted Old Kit, as he turned toward the black forest.

But he abruptly paused and glanced toward Hall. Alf was standing with open mouth, in amazement.

A strange sound—a series of sounds, came to their ears from the forest. Angry yells, mingled with fierce curses and heavy blows.

“Foller—Sam’s in trouble,” gritted Duncan, as he cocked his pistol and scrambled up the bank.

Regardless of the scratches and thumps given them by the stiff underbrush, the trappers hastened on to the spot from whence proceeded the noise. Then they paused. After gaping in astonishment for a moment, Old Kit uttered a choking yell and sunk upon the snow, almost bursting with laughter. **And well he might laugh.**

As the ambushed shots sent death to his comrades, one of

the savages plunged for the nearest cover, doubtless trusting to elude pursuit in the dense and tangled forest. But the keen eye of Yankee Sam had detected his movement, and realizing the peril—almost certain destruction, that one escape would entail, he dashed forward in hot pursuit.

Running a few yards, the savage suddenly came upon a broad gully, and attempted to leap over it, but his foot slipped, and he alighted in the middle of the snow bed, breaking through the crust, sinking nearly to the armpits. Rushing after at full speed, the long Yankee was unable to check himself in time, and so leaped for the enemy, alighting just within arm's length.

The shock caused him to drop his pistol, that skimmed along the crust, beyond reach. The hands of both were empty, nor did they dare reach below the snow to secure other weapons, for fear of the other.

The savage struggled to get free, but found his feet tangled with vines and brush that grew at the bottom of the gully. And Yankee Sam quickly made the same discovery, but, resolved to secure the savage, he worked forward to seize him.

In desperation the red-skin shot out his clenched fist. Full upon Yankee Sam's long, thin nose it alighted, bringing involuntary tears to his eyes as the blood spurted from the insulted member.

With a howl of fury, Grimes squared off and planted his fists—*one—two*. Then at it they went, hammer and tongs, giving and taking, both far too angry to think of warding off blows, and each only intent in punishing his antagonist.

And at this work, their battered noses beautifully spotting the snow-crust, Old Kit found them. No wonder, then, that he laughed.

Hearing new enemies, the red-skin only thought of escape, and so fell an easy prey to the Yankee. Sam clutched his throat with one hand, raining heavy blows upon the bruised face with his iron fists, growling and snarling like a wild beast.

"Hellow! what in wonder— Ha! ha!" and Fred Mitchell joined in the chorus with Duncan and Alf.

"Ugh! die—dog of a Cree!" uttered a deep tone, and then, flashing through the air, a heavy knife sunk to the hilt in the red-skin's heart.

"Thunder! whar'd that come from?" spluttered Grimes, suddenly drawing back.

For the first time he became aware of the presence of others, as he glanced up the bank. Then plunging a hand beneath the snow, he whipped forth a revolver, leveling it at a dark form upon the bank above.

"A Injun—darn it, leow many more?" he snorted, as the hammer fell.

"Hold, Sam—don't shoot!" cried Mitchell, as he sprung before the man aimed at. "It's a friend—the Indian we saved."

"Thunder! lucky thar was snow on the cap, then," and Yankee Sam dolefully rubbed his nose.

The Indian drew back, glaring first upon one, then upon another, his hand resting upon the half-drawn hatchet at his waist. The action of Grimes had awakened his suspicions that he had only escaped one danger to fall into the power of other foes.

"Easy, Injun; don't be brash," quickly uttered Old Kit, stepping forward. "We don't mean you no harm, 'less you cut up rusty. Else for why'd we save ye from them Crees?"

"The yellow man would have shot me," muttered the red-skin, though the glitter in his eyes softened at the words of the old trapper.

"A mistake—he thought you one of the Crees," added Mitchell. "He fought for you down on the river."

"Say, darn it all!" spluttered Sam, in disgust. "Cain't yeou help a feller? Let us git eout o' this 'ere trap, then yeou kin talk all day 'f yeou want."

"All right, my covey," and Duncan slid down the bank. "Giv' us your han'. Thar—but, oh, ge-long! *ain't* you a purty lookin' critter jest now!" and he went into another fit of laughter over Yankee Sam's dilapidated appearance.

"Snicker, darn ye! Wish't *yeou'd* 'a' bin in my place—the varmint hed a fist like a muel's hind foot."

"I'll hev the rib-ache for a month burn me 'f I don't," muttered Kit, faintly. "*Sech* a sight—lord, 'f your gal would only 'a' see'd you two a-peggin' away like that—an' you a church member!"

"Shet up, r *yeou* won't be much better," growled Sam, angrily.

"Hey? Don't shoot your mouth off to that tune, boy, to me. I've ett better men'n you *dar'* be for a stay-my-stomach ontel breakfast," retorted Kit, flashing up.

"There—no quarreling among friends," hastily interrupted Mitchell, knowing their hot passions when rubbing together. "We've enough else upon our hands without that, goodness knows."

"True as shootin', and thar's my han', Sam."

"All right—but don't say nothin' more abeout my gal. The only one't I ever hed is dead, an' it's my sore peint—"

"I ax pardin, Sam—I didn't know that," and the two clasped hands cordially.

"Jest look at the heathen varmint," muttered Sam, with an expression of disgust, as the Indian slid down into the gulley, and plucking the knife from the body, dextrously lifted it's scalp.

"Ugh! Cree scalp *good!*" quickly retorted the savage, catching the purport of Sam's words.

"It's his raisin', boys," philosophically added Duncan. "They'd 'a' sarved him the same way, only for us droppin' on 'em as we did."

"Who can he be—surely not a Wood Cree?"

"No—this is a *man*; them Wood Crees are dogs that skeer at thar own shader, and drop tail at thar own yelpin'. Would one o' them showed fight ag'inst seven? Not much. But you've got me. I cain't read the feller. He wore Blackfoot moccasins an' Cree leggin's, but he's too good-lookin' for either."

Old Kit abruptly ceased his comments as the subject of them came close to him, steadily looking into his face. Gradually a soft, grateful light filled the black eyes, and a faint smile quivered round the Indian's lips. Then he spoke, his voice, though deep and sonorous, sounding musical as the words dropped slowly from his lips.

"Look! does The Man with Two Horses see the face of a brother?"

Duncan started with surprise; for years he had not heard this title, bestowed upon him by the Indians while he acted

as scout and hunter for the garrison at Fort Union. Then it was rarely that an Indian of full blood could speak the English language with such purity.

"I've met you afore, chief, but jest how or whar, I cain't for the life o' me call to mind," returned Kit, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"See—I will blow away the cloud; an Indian never forgets. Now—it is very cold. The river is deep. The breath of the North Spirit cuts like the edge of a new knife. Three white hunters are riding toward the big lodge. They see an Indian lying upon the snow. He is sick—two days before his horse fell, and broke the red-man's leg. He looks at the white faces. Two of them say, '*Injun rascal, let the coyotes eat him!*' The other stops, lifts the Indian upon the horse, then walks on, holding the red-man safe in the saddle. He pays the Medicine-man at the big lodge to cure—"

"I know ye now, chief," interrupted Duncan, his face glowing with earnest pleasure. "Boys, this is Blackbird, the head chief o' the Omahas—the whitest man that ever wore a red skin sence the y'ar one!"

"The friends of Wathena are dear to the heart of Blackbird," gracefully replied the chief, cordially returning the hand-pressures.

"Just so—we're all one fambly o' brothers now, an' I reckon we'll need to be sech afore we're well out o' this scrape. But who'd 'a' thunk o' seein' *you* here, Blackbird?"

"My brothers shall know all soon—but first the trail of blood must be covered, or the Cree dogs will be howling their death-songs in our ears."

"Was any more follerin' ye chief, but these?"

"I think not. But they will be looked for, when their brother dogs miss their faces."

The Cree who had been slain in the gully was thrust beneath the snow-crust, and then all traces of blood carefully smoothed over. Those who had fallen in the river-bed were treated in a similar manner, after Blackbird had divested them of their scalp locks.

Then old Kit led the way over the hill to the place where nestled their rude cabin, in an unusually dense portion of the pine forest, though at no great distance from the Saskatch-

ewan. This had not been disturbed since their departure, before daylight. Indeed, until that day, the trappers had not met with a human being for full two months past, for the Indians journeyed but little, save in quest of food, during the winter.

The cabin was rude, but comfortable, built of unhewn logs, the interstices between being snugly caulked with mortar made of mud and chopped grass. A roof of dry pine sticks, thickly covered over with marsh-grass and mud, proved watertight. The door was made of logs, squared and tightly joined, hung upon wooden hinges. The chimney was built inside, of stones and mud. Even in that climate—where the thermometer frequently marks 40° below zero, the cabin was warm and comfortable.

The walls were hung round with furs in course of airing. A ready packed bale lay in one corner. Others formed pallets for the trappers' use at night. Several chunks of dried meat hung beside the chimney, buffalo and deer-flesh, together with skin-bags of *pemmican*.

Duncan built up the fire and busily prepared their rude meal, Blackbird at the same time telling his story. Feeling secure, for that day at least, from interruption, the trappers listened with interest.

Blackbird was the war-chief of his tribe, the Omahas, or the feeble remnant, rather, for they are now but little more than a memory. To this day his exploits and deeds of bravery are sung by his descendants, and, after due allowance for exaggeration, beyond all doubt he was an uncommon man. Perhaps the grandest monument ever raised in memory of man is that which covers his ashes. Towering high above the mad Missouri, "Blackbird Hill" can be seen from the river for full thirty miles. And this was raised above him as he sat astride his favorite war-horse, by the hands of his mourning people.*

"Four moons ago," began Blackbird, speaking in a low,

* This paragraph is historical. Blackbird lived and was buried as described, though years before the date of this story. His adventures while in pursuit of those who abducted his squaw, were gathered from the lips of one of his own braves, called "Bear-with-the-split-lip," who still lives in the shadow of the mound, to the summit of which he makes daily visits to watch the setting of the sun, and to chant the death-song of Blackbird. Why I have altered the dates is self-evident.

monotonous tone, though his gloomy eyes but too plainly showed that this quietude was but a mask, "I led the Omahas upon the fall hunt. Just as we were emptying our quivers into the first herd of buffalo, a runner brought us black words. A war-party of the Blackfeet Bloody-men* had swooped down upon the Omaha village, and though the long-tongued dogs were beaten back by the few boys and old men who had not joined the hunt, they carried away with them some squaws. Among them was Etiwee, the one who kept my lodge-fire burning.

"The Omahas are not dogs. Their squaws are dearer to them than aught else save the scalps of their enemies. So when the cry sounded, the braves came to my heels, leaving the dead buffalo for the coyotes to feast upon.

"Before the moon paled that night, we were riding along upon the trail left by the fleeing dogs. For two suns we followed; those whose horses dropped dead upon the trail ran behind on foot. The next night we caught them. They stood up and gave us blow for blow like true braves; but it was only because in the Omahas they saw death. Even a coyote will fight, sometimes.

"Blood fell like rain. The sand was wet with it. Our knife-blades were dull, our arms tired before the fight was done. And then? Blackbird's heart was sore, for Etiwee was not with the squaws. A black cloud came over his eyes, but then he was once more a war-chief of the Omahas.

"The Blackfeet were dead—their bodies could not speak to tell me where was Etiwee, but then the squaw of Double Ax put light into the darkness. Etiwee was young and pleasing to the eye—at least, so thought Tall Grass, a chief of the Siksikaga band, and he claimed her for his share. With her he rode hard to his people. With three braves I followed his trail; the rest returned to the village. We found the Blackfoot at home, and two nights after entered the village to steal away the heart of Blackbird. But a man-dog scented an enemy, and raised the war-cry. He died by the hand of a man. The village was large. We were in its middle, four braves against hundreds. With our hatchets and knives we trod a trail of blood. That night was a black one for the

* Kainnar, a sub-division of the tribe.

Siksikaga. Karagou, the truest eye of the Omahas, sunk first. Then Yolo, the swift. Emantara, the strong, kept beside his chief until the village was cleared—then he died. Blackbird alone escaped, though the dogs hunted him hard for three suns. Then they went back to their people, with bowed heads—but not all. As many as my fingers of both hands were food for the coyotes.

“The Siksikagas wore black faces for many suns, for while they were hunting the Omaha, the Plain Crees struck them a blow, taking many scalps, and with them a lot of squaws. Among these rode Etiwee, though her chief was days in finding out the truth. Then Blackbird took the new trail. It ended among the hills beside the big river. He sought for Etiwee, lying in ambush around the village. Last night he entered the town. He found the lodge that held his heart, and spoke to her. But other ears heard his words. A Cree dog leaped upon his back as he lay beside the lodge. Blackbird’s knife drank his blood, but the death-yell awoke the village. Again the Omaha escaped. With day the wolves took his trail. Blackbird was tired and wounded. His feet were heavy; his eyes were shut by the sleeping spirit, but their steps awoke him. He shot one, then fled. They followed. They were fresh—for a month the Omaha had not known rest. Blackbird saw them creeping near. He heard their yells—saw their thirst for his blood, and his heart grew heavy, because he believed Etiwee was doomed to become the slave of a slave.

“But the Great Spirit was not sleeping. He sent help. That help was my white brothers. Blackbird thanks them. Life is very sweet to him now, because he knows that Etiwee lives and looks for his coming.”

“Gi’ us your paw, chief—you’re a true man ef your skin is red,” cried Old Kit, in admiration over the chief’s deeds.

“But ’t seems to me like we are gittin’ intew a purty consid’able o’ a snarl,” dryly remarked Grimes. “Them Crees ’ll move heaven an’ airth but they ’ll hev pay fer them braves, an’ ef they stum’le on *us*, I wouldn’t give a continental cuss fer our pelts or skelps either.”

“The Yellow Man need not be afraid,” quietly replied the Omaha. “Blackbird will blind the eyes of the Crees, and

lead them away, while his white brothers can hide their trail to a better trapping-ground."

"No, be durned 'f you do, chief. You've showed yourself a man, an' I won't run away an' leave you to buck ag'in' the hull tribe alone. Sam kin, 'f he likes."

"There—" interposed Mitchell. "Sam's growl is worse than his bite. He'll do what's right, and won't be found wanting when the time comes. But now I move we turn in, though it's so early. It may be our last chance for a good sleep for a while."

"Ontel we all git bloody nightcaps," grumbled Yankee Sam.

And so, taking turn about watching, the night passed without event worthy of note.

CHAPTER II.

MEETING CRAFT WITH CRAFT.

OLD KIT roused his comrades an hour before daylight. Then as he removed several slices of meat smoking hot from the coals, he said :

"To-day we'll smell fun, 'f at all. In the fust place we'll look at our traps an' *cache* them in a safe place. Ef we hev to pull out o' this, it'll be in too big a hurry to do much backin'."

"Suppose they should find the cabin while we were all gone, and lay for us coming back?" suggested Mitchell.

"The chief 'll see to that. He kin *cache* in the holler pine, an' keep comf'table. Better take the pelts thar, too."

"Blackbird will do as his brother says. To-day he will rest, because he can do nothing until the sun hides its face. But then he goes to Etiwee," quietly uttered the young chief.

"All right—come, I'll show ye the *cache*," and Kit took up the bale of furs and left the cabin.

The air was unusually keen and piercing, and the old trapper, though seasoned, momentarily shivered while his

blood seemed to turn to ice. But Blackbird gave no evidence of feeling the cold.

Duncan paused beside a huge pine tree whose feathery crest far overtopped the surrounding forest. Vines and shrubbery thickly screened its base. Parting these, Old Kit revealed a dark aperture close to the surface of the snow-crust, yet large enough to admit the body of a man.

"This is the *cache*, chief. You'll find the inside big a plenty. 'Thar's steps cut up one side. Look close an' you'll find a deep hole that overlooks the cabin yender. Jest under it's a knot whar you kin set easy. Then nobody cain't come nigh the place 'thout you seein' or hearin' them."

"It is good. The beaver is cunning, but my brother Kit can open its eyes. The Cree dogs will lose their captive, now that Blackbird has gained such a friend."

"Your tongue is slicker 'n soft soap, chief," laughed Kit, yet with a gratified sparkle in his eyes. "But I'll go now. When I git back we'll talk more about your squaw, an' how to git her free."

Doubly cautioning his younger and less experienced comrades, Kit Duncan parted from them and set off to visit his traps. In doing this there was danger in being discovered by the Plain Crees, but traps were very costly in that remote region, and worth running some risk for.

Though Kit Duncan had the longest route to follow, his rounds were finished first, owing to a simple but most provoking cause. Every one of his traps had already been visited before the owner reached them.

The first was a marten-trap. With stakes about three feet in length, a half-oval was formed across the trail. In this palisade a bait was set upon the end of a stick that supported a heavy log. The marten or fisher, in scouting round for breakfast, scents the bait, and crawling beneath the log, snaps at it. This removes the prop, the tree falls, and the animal gets a broken back.

From a distance Kit saw that his "deadfall" was sprung, and hastened forward with a thrill of exultation known only to the successful trapper. Then he opened his lips and swore.

The snow around was marked with blood—bits of fur lay

lence ere and there. A marten had been caught, then dug out and devoured.

hery "Cuss the luck!" gritted Duncan, bending low over the snow-crust in the gray light of dawn. "A Injun Devil, by Kit mighty!"

ow- The reader may or may not know that this animal is the carcajou, or wolverine. Among trappers his name is that given by Old Kit, on authority of the Indians, who solemnly affirm that the brute is the only son of his Satanic majesty. And indeed, the cunning it often displays gives good foundation for the superstition. It will follow a hunter through his entire rounds, watching him set each trap. And the next morning, when the trapper sets out with great anticipations, he finds that Mr. Injun Devil has been beforehand with him. Not a trap will be overlooked. Such as contain prey the carcajou will rob, not stopping even when he can eat no more, but carrying the meat to a *cache* of its own. If not sprung, he will steal the bait, first rendering the trap useless. The "deadfall" he laughs at. Squatting on his haunches he studies it out, finds out its weak point, attacks it and confiscates the bait. Occasionally he is caught in a steel-trap. A fox or wolf will tamely submit, or else gnaw off the imprisoned leg. Not so the carcajou. With his dog-like jaws and powerful claws, he first detaches the trap from tree or stake, then drags it to a covert. He goes to work with wedge and lever, and with incredible perseverance labors away until the jaws are sprung far enough to extricate his leg. This sounds incredible, yet 'tis a well-attested fact. It also appears that he has the power of detecting poison by scent. Such bait will be passed by untouched. Fortunately, it rarely attacks man; were it otherwise minded, it would prove a formidable enemy, since its strength is superior to that of any other animal of these high latitudes, the grizzly bear alone excepted.

"Ef he's bin to the next one, then I'll strike straight fer the steel-traps—though like's not the cussed varmint hes kerried them all off—be jest my luck," growled Kit, as he glided on over the snow-crust.

The second deadfall *had* been visited and the bait eaten, though in this case the wolverine had found nothing else. In disgust, knowing that the same result would await him at

the other traps, Kit turned abruptly to the left, and struck out for the second round.

But here, too, the four-legged trapper had left his traces, and Duncan fairly foamed with rage as he stopped by a steel-trap that contained the leg of a silver fox, and saw the ragged bits of bloody fur scattered around. So rare is this animal, that its skin readily brings from two to two hundred and fifty dollars. Little wonder then that Old Kit cursed and swore eternal vengeance upon the race of Injun Devils.

Sullenly he collected his traps and slung them upon his back, then glanced around to take the bearings of the camp. A direct route would take him within a mile of the spot where the trappers had rescued Blackbird, and Kit resolved to learn whether or no the bodies of the Cree warriors had yet been discovered by their friends.

Thar's time a plenty. The boys won't hev hed sech cussed luck as I hev—they'll be longer gettin' back."

Half an hour later the old trapper was crouching down upon the hill-top where we first beheld him, his eyes roving keenly over the scene spread below. The snow-covered river was dotted here and there by dark forms, slinking noiselessly about, or sitting upon their haunches, now and then uttering a long, lugubrious howl.

"Drat the wolves!" gritted Duncan, angrily. "They've smelled the blood, an' must be busy in un'arthin' the karkidges. But I'll send 'em to thar holes, in a—"

His mutterings abruptly ceased, and his gaze became riveted upon one particular point, far down in the river-bed. A dozen dark spots seemed slowly moving up the level bed. More by instinct than aught else Kit knew these were human beings—and from their number, Indians.

"My head ag'inst a mug o' beer it's Crees, trailing up the varmints we rubbed out! *Durn* the wolves! Only for them, they mought pass by onknowin'ly."

For a moment Kit appeared undecided, but then crept into a dense mass of shrubbery, carefully replacing the foliage behind him. Then through a tiny aperture he peered out upon the savages.

These slowly advanced. A trail upon the hard, frozen snow-crust is not an easy thing to follow, unless it is freshly

made. Then the patches where the gloss is destroyed plainly tell where a foot has passed. The past night had almost perfectly restored this gloss, and only for the slight scratches made by the swiftly-flying feet, the trail could not have been followed at all. Thus, fully as much by the sense of touch as of sight, the Cree braves followed on to the spot of death.

With sullen howls, the wolves slunk away, showing their long, hungry fangs. From his covert upon the hill-top Kit Duncan anxiously awaited the result.

The Crees paused at a point where the crust had been broken, and one of them thrust the end of his bow into the hole. With an exclamation that faintly reached the ambushed trapper, he started back, gesticulating excitedly.

Then the crust was broken and torn aside, the light snow scraped out, until the bare head of an Indian corpse was brought to view. A moment's silence, and then a cry arose, so wild, so mournful, and yet so full of a deadly vengeance, that old Kit shuddered in his covert, rose upon the air, echoed back by the surrounding woods and hills in a thousand reverberations.

It was the death-wail of the Plain Crees.

The body was lifted out upon the crust, and carefully examined. The broad breast bore no wound, but between the shoulders were two small round holes.

Another cry arose. Duncan closed his lips firmly, for he knew what it meant. The Crees knew now that their brother had fallen by the hand of a pale-face. And his bronzed face paled as he saw them using their knives upon the dead man's breast, then draw together as though slowly examining some object. And so they were. They held the bullets that killed their brother.

Woe unto the white man whose weapons those were found to fit!

In silence the Cree braves continued their search. Kit watched them as they unearthed one after another of the savages he had helped slay, with a fascination new as strange to him.

The risk of discovery was considerable, in case the Crees should search the vicinity for further signs of those who had

killed their people. Yet it was essential that their real purpose should be learned, and Kit resolved to run the risk.

For a time the Crees consulted earnestly, remaining undecided. One of the party who had set out in chase of the Omaha chief was still missing, since only six bodies had been found.

Finally they took up the scalpless forms and slowly retraced their steps, beyond doubt returning to their village. Duncan's face brightened up at this, though he knew it was only a respite. The Plain Crees would lose no time in avenging their brothers, and would work all the more thoroughly for proceeding systematically.

"Now fer the boys," muttered Duncan, crawling forth from his covert. "We've got the rest o' the day good. The varmints won't be apt to find the cabin afore to-morrow. An' to-night, 'f at all, the chief must git his squaw free."

Duncan hastened on, though taking more than ordinary caution not to leave a plain trail behind him. Busied with this, he passed by the long avenue-like opening that led down to the river. Had his gaze been bent in this direction, he might not have felt quite so easy in his mind.

Nearing the cabin, Old Kit crept along like some wood-phantom, but no sign telling of the presence of enemies met his gaze. Then he uttered the agree-dupon signal. Like an echo the reply came, sounding faint and muffled.

"The chief's still in the tree—then all's hunky yit," and Duncan drew a long breath. "Come out, boys. The cabin's more comfortable 'n that holler. Thar's no danger pressin'."

Blackbird glided from the hollow tree, followed by the two young trappers. Yankee Sam had not yet returned from his rounds.

Entering the cabin, Kit replenished the fire with some carefully selected wood, then loaded his pipe. Fred and Alf, more from habit than aught else, began skinning the game they had taken from their traps, and stretching the pelts.

Kit briefly sketched the scene he had witnessed at the river-

bed, Blackbird listening intently. A bright light filled his expressive eyes.

"Well, chief," added Duncan, after a pause, "what d' you think o' it?"

"A pappoose can read the secrets of a Cree, with closed eyes. They carry their dead dogs to their village, that their brothers, the coyotes, may not be poisoned by eating them. Then they will go out in a big crowd, that their hearts may not weaken, and hunt for scalps. They know that Blackbird is alive, for they saw where his arrow carried death to the big Cree. They know too that he has found friends—white friends."

"But *how* do they know you were rescued by whites?" curiously queried Mitchell.

"Listen. Kit saw them cut out the two bullets that he sent into the Cree's back. They have eyes, though they are dim. Both bullets came from the same weapon. An Indian does not carry a rifle that uses such a little ball. Thus they are not rich enough to get a two-shoot gun, or the little gun with a handful of mouths. So they will know that a pale-face helped Blackbird. What would white men do here, unless to take fur? And how long can they live without a lodge to warm them in?"

"This is what the Crees will say. Then they will hunt for the lodge of the pale fur-catchers. It is here—they will find it. A day and night is much time. With it my brothers can easily beat the Crees to the big lodges."

"Then you think we'd better pull up stakes an' run fer it, eh?"

"The Cree dogs are many and their arrows are sharp. My white brothers left soft hearts behind them. Their people would long wear blackened faces if they never returned."

"That's true enough. I know one that would for Alf, anyhow," and Kit's eyes sparkled mischievously. "But I don't like to turn my back on a fri'nd, chief—I don't, by 'mighty!"

"Then why der yer dew it, say?" demanded the voice of Yankee Sam, at the door, he having crept up unheard. "Open the door — I'm e'ena'most friz. I've got a

quar kind o' game here, tew—somethin' ter match the chief's."

As he entered, Grimes cast a dark object upon the floor, which Blackbird instantly picked up. An exclamation of pleasure broke from his lips, as he turned and seized Sam's hand.

"You are a great brave—Blackbird is proud of his yellow brother!"

"A Cree scalp, by thunder!" cried Kit, taking the mass of hair in his hand. "Fresh, too. Where 'd you find it, Sam?"

"On the spot where it nat'rally growed. I was looking at my traps, when somebody blazed away at me from ahind a bush. The bullet creased me—see," and he pointed to a bloody patch upon the top of his shoulder. "Tew big a load o' powder saved me that time. The smoke showed me whar it come from—and I dropped the varmint. Fer fear you'd think I was jokin', I brung the proof along. Hang it with t' other, chief; I hain't no further use fer it."

"Wal, it's one the less to look out fer, anyhow. Now see here, chief. It's no two ways 'bout it, we've got to pull up stakes and mosey. But we ain't goin' to leave you ahind us."

"Blackbird must not disappoint Etiwee. She looks for his coming with every hour," quietly added the Omaha.

"Then, boys, how is it—shell we sneak off an' let the chief hev all the fun? Is it like a white man to take a *dar'* from a red-skin?"

"I for one am willing to be guided by you," and Mitchell's words were promptly seconded by Hall and Grimes.

"Wal, then, I say le's lend him a helpin' hand. Mebbe we kin help him git back his squaw an' save our pelts, too."

"Blackbird is not rich, but his word is law to his people. They will pay his white brothers ten skins for every one they lose in helping the Omaha," quietly added the chief.

"Good as wheat!" murmured Yankee Sam.

"Then it's settled. Come, boys, the sooner we begin, the quicker we'll be done. Pack up sech o' the furs as is wuth the most, an' take 'em to the tree. Chief, help me with the grub."

Willing hands make quick work, and in a few minutes the cabin was dismantled, and left in such a disordered state that the Crees, when they made the discovery, would think its late occupants had precipitately fled after rescuing the Omaha. For the time being the hollow tree was to serve the trappers as a home.

Blackbird and Kit Duncan were standing near the tree, conversing in a low tone about the task that lay before them, when the chief abruptly ceased, his form assuming a statue-like stillness. Only his eyes moved, a peculiar fire filling their depths.

Something in his look warned Old Kit of impending peril, and that caution was needed. Still his keen ears, now strained to catch any suspicious sound, failed to detect any thing of the kind that might account for the Omaha's sudden change.

"Blackbird smells an enemy," hissed the chief, not a muscle of his face moving. "Let Kit listen, but his face must not repeat the words he hears. The eyes of a spy are upon us—a scout of the Crees lies in the bush, counting our numbers. Blackbird can whirl and shoot him, but the bushes may stop the arrow so that he will have time to utter a death-yell. If he is alone, that would not matter; but we must be snakes now. I will turn round and point up in a tree. You make ready your rifle, as though to make sure of the game if I miss. Keep looking where I point. The dog is hidden in the bushes at the foot of the dead tree. Do you understand?"

A glance from Kit was the reply, and then Blackbird carelessly turned around. His eyes did not appear to rest upon the clump of bushes alluded to, but nevertheless he saw them move faintly.

Reaching one hand back to the old trapper, the other was extended toward the top of a densely-limbed tree some fifty yards away. Kit seemed interested, and threw forward his rifle, cocking it, but Blackbird shook his head, then tapped his bow, carefully selecting an arrow from the quiver at his back, which he then dropped to the ground.

Notching the arrow to the string, he glided silently away, his gaze riveted upon the tree-top indicated, as though the game was one that needed caution to secure. He bent to the

right, thus passing close to the clump of bushes, in which he knew an armed foeman was hidden. Not once did he glance toward this, though as he passed by he heard a faint rustle from their midst, and did not know but that the Cree was even then leveling a shaft at his life.

With motionless features, but anxiously beating heart, Kit waited the result, closely watching the bush out of the corner of his eye, while his face was turned toward the tree indicated. He saw Blackbird pass the ambush, and then on until the huge dead stub was placed between him and the spy's hiding-place.

Here he halted, though moving his feet regularly, as though still gliding on, lighter and more faint, until he finally paused altogether. Turning, he waved one hand to Kit, then laid bow and arrow upon the ground. He had resolved to capture the spy if possible.

Noiselessly as a shadow he crept back to the dead-wood, and pausing beside it, listened intently. Not a sound met his ear. Then he cautiously peered round the body.

His eyes sparkled like living coals as he detected a bit of bronzed skin shining through the bushes. Thus guided, he leaped forward and upward, crashing through the bushes, alighting fairly upon the Cree's back, dashing him heavily forward upon the snow. The next moment his sinewy fingers wound round the spy's throat, effectually checking all outcry.

As the leap was made, Kit sprung forward, and bent to assist the chief. Blackbird laughed; a peculiar sound that caused Duncan to start, despite his iron nerves, so full of deadly malice was it.

"Bind the blind dog's hands. Take his bow-string. He will not need it again."

Kit promptly obeyed, and then tearing a moccasin from the spy's foot, crammed it tightly between the distended jaws.

"Thar—he won't screech out *now*," chuckled Kit.

"It is good. Drag the dog to the cabin. Blackbird will look if more of his tribe are near."

Half an hour later the Omaha returned, pronouncing the vicinity free from enemies. He found the Cree recovered from his severe choking, sullen but defiant.

The trappers were all present. They felt that a tragedy was about to be enacted, and though the majority felt averse to killing a prisoner in cold blood, they could but acknowledge that their lives in a great measure depended upon his death, since he must have discovered the secret of the hollow tree.

Blackbird crouched down beside the Cree captive, eying him gloatingly. The Cree defiantly returned the gaze. He was tall, well made, and not unhandsome for an Indian. Two scarcely-healed wounds marked his broad chest, beside other scars of older date. Around his neck hung a rudely-carved representation of a fox's foot. Upon his forehead, done in white paint, was a like totem.

"The Cree has a name?" began Blackbird, in a low and singularly musical voice. "These tell that he is a brave warrior," and he gently touched the scarred breast.

"Omaha hands left these scratches. The hand of a squaw is not heavy enough to touch the life of a *man*," retorted the captive.

"True—the Omahas are cowardly dogs that yelp in fear at their own shadow," said Blackbird, in mock humility. "Their war-chief is a squaw. He trembles at the sight of a brave. He would fly away now, only that the mighty brave is fast bound. Yes, Blackbird is a squaw."

"The Omaha's tongue is straight when he talks with a warrior, he speaks true words. He is a squaw—the son of a dog. Fox-foot killed that dog. He carries the white scalp with him to poison the coyotes as they yelp at his heels."

For some moments Blackbird remained motionless. The younger trappers shuddered as they glanced into his eyes. They were the eyes of a very demon, then. He knew that some of the Crees had killed his father, but until now had not known which one. With a twist of his body, the Cree allowed a tress of white hair to show through the slit in his shirt. Seizing it, Blackbird recognized the trophy.

Slowly he drew his knife. The Cree laughed, low and tauntingly. Knowing that death was inevitable, he provoked a speedy one.

Like lightning the blade encircled the captive's head. Then Blackbird held a scalp-lock before Fox-foot's eyes. It had

been severed close to the skin. He was degraded—forever debarred from entering the happy hunting-grounds of his people. This was the refinement of torture.

An expression of terrible despair overspread his features. Laughing like a fiend, Blackbird lifted his knife. The breast of Fox-foot rose to meet the blow.

To the haft the weapon sunk. Without a moan the body fell back. Fox-foot, the degraded, was dead.

CHAPTER III

THE OMAHA'S GREAT EXPLOIT.

THE two trappers, Mitchell and Hall, turned away with a shudder, and sought shelter in the hollow tree. In their eyes this unresisted blow was cold-blooded murder.

Old Kit saw in it nothing beyond what was right. A life for a life—a scalp for a scalp. Such was the law he had honored for many years.

"The varmint is dead—what shall we do with him, chief?" at length uttered Duncan.

"He must go back to his friends, to tell them what he has seen," quietly returned Blackbird.

Kit appeared puzzled for a moment, but then, as the Omaha carefully scrutinized each line of paint upon the dead man's face and breast, a light flashed upon his mind. He knew that Blackbird meant to personate the Cree brave, Fox-foot.

"You'd beat the devil at his own game, chief—you would so! But how kin ye do it?"

"See!" and Blackbird held up the dead Cree's paint-sack.

"Well, sence you're bound to resk it, I won't say nothin' ag'inst it. Come—I'll help ye, while the daylight lasts."

Line by line, symbol after symbol, the dextrous hand of the old trapper reproduced upon the Omaha the war-dress of the Cree. Last, and with more pains, he drew the white paw upon Blackbird's forehead, and then, drawing back, contemplated his work with great satisfaction.

"It's truer than natur', Kit," uttered Grimes. "Yeou'd orter go back to the States an' hang eout yeour sign as face-painter. The ladies 'd all patternize ye."

Blackbird now plaited his long hair in accurate imitation of Fox-foot's scalp-lock, which was the more easily done since both tribes wore all their hair, only braiding the scalp-lock separate; and then he donned the leggings, breech-clout, deer-skin shirt and collar of the dead Cree. Slipping on the moccasins, Blackbird stood erect, an admirable representative of the spy.

"It 'll do, seein' the work is by night," slowly uttered Duncan. "But the face mought betray ye—you're too good-lookin', chief, fer a Plain Cree."

Blackbird smiled slightly at this blunt compliment. Then he quietly replied:

"Fox-foot shoot at a wolf. The arrow split and hurt his eye. That is why his head is bound up."

In a few moments the Omaha had a poultice of leaves upon his right eye, bound there by a strip torn from his shirt. The bandage was then slightly touched with the still oozing blood of the despoiled Cree brave, and Blackbird stood prepared for his desperate venture. In this guise he meant to penetrate the village of the Plain Crees, and if possible rescue Etiwee, his beloved squaw, from their clutches.

"Reckon yeou'd better hide the critter, hedn't ye? It 'd look sorter funny ef the heathen should find both a dead an' a live Fox-foot," remarked Yankee Sam.

"Ketch hold, then. We'll tote him to the gully. They won't find him thar none too soon, I don't reckon."

The dead spy was cast into a gully, and then covered with snow. Only a close examination would discover his resting-place, and before then, in all probability, the trappers would be far beyond reach of the savages.

Snugly ensconced in the hollow tree, our friends patiently waited for the fall of night, as until then they could do nothing. The opening was choked up with furs and skins, and the interior made quite comfortable. The lack of fire could easily be endured, while thus sheltered.

Old Kit was particular in his instructions. Upon no account were the trappers to leave the tree until his return.

One was to be constantly on the watch, astride the knot above, nor were the others to fall asleep if it could possibly be avoided. They were to listen for a signal, and if the coast was clear to answer with the same; if not, then with a different one.

Shortly after the darkness told that night was at hand, Kit and the chief left the tree. It was yet early—for the sun had not once been visible that day—but they had a goodly distance to travel before reaching the Cree village, and Blackbird wished to enter it before the inhabitants had retired to rest.

Noiselessly, save for the faint, almost imperceptible crushing of the snow particles beneath their moccasined feet, the adventurers glided on through the forest, crossing the ice-bound Saskatchewan, heading directly for the village of the Plain Crees. Blackbird's plans were already formed, and Kit, though not exactly satisfied with the quiet part he was to play, knew that all was for the best.

An hour after crossing the river, they paused upon the edge of the forest. Before them lay the Cree village, scarcely half a mile distant, distinctly visible across the white snow-crust.

"Kit must wait here," uttered Blackbird, in a low, guarded tone. "The Omaha will go alone."

"Mebbe it's better so, but I wish I could go with you, chief. It 'd be like old times."

"Kit is a true friend, and Blackbird thanks him."

As though desirous of escaping all further words, the disguised chief glided away, heading directly toward the village. A number of brightly blazing fires told him that the Crees were still astir.

The village was pitched in a sort of hollow basin, something over a mile in diameter. Upon three sides were considerable hills, covered with stunted pines and shrubs; on the other side the ground was nearly level, with a more than usually open forest extending to the bank of the Saskatchewan. Over this last tract our friends had passed.

The disguised Omaha had passed full one-half of the distance before his approach was noted from the village. Then two Indians started out as if to meet him. Confiding

in his disguise, Blackbird did not falter, boldly facing them.

"The chiefs are waiting for the coming of Fox-foot," spoke the foremost Cree, curiously eying the disguised. "The faint-hearts said that my brother had followed his last trail—that the hiding dogs had drank his blood, too."

"No—they have fled. But their feet are heavy and leave a broad trail behind them. The Cree braves will follow and take their scalps, and drink their blood," returned the spy, in pure dialect.

A shrill voice from the village put an end to further talk. The council was being summoned. Walking between the two Crees, Blackbird entered the village. Evidently Fox-foot had been a personage of no little importance, judging from the many glances cast toward the counterfeit as he neared the council-lodge—a square log cabin in the center of the village.

In silence Blackbird entered the cabin, and crouched down beside the blazing fire, his keen eye—since only one remained uncovered—glancing quickly around the company assembled. Besides himself, the cabin contained fully a score painted warriors.

The customary ceremonies opened the council, though with greater haste than common; then a savage arose.

In stature he was a giant, with limbs unusually long and powerful. His face was seamed and scarred, and only one eye remained. His hair was nearly white, though this could scarcely be the effect of age, alone.

"Children," he began, speaking quick and sharply—"the Great Spirit frowns upon us. He is very angry, because we have not obeyed his Prophet. Weeping and wailing fill my ears. And why? Because the words of Withagona dropped unheeded to the ground. The Wahcatunca demands a sacrifice. It must be given, or the Plain Crees will disappear from the face of the earth.

"Listen. We have one captive—Etiwee, the squaw of Blackbird, the Omaha. But a brave—a man, would be better and more acceptable. Blackbird is near at hand—his arrow sent the Otter home. We know that he is a brave, though an enemy. His blood would clear the cloud from the face of

Wahcatunca. We will capture him and burn him. Witha-gona cannot lie, and he says it.

"The Prophet has lifted the spell from the Cree braves. Our seven brothers died because they hunted an enemy before their fasting was done. Only the Prophet, by word of the Wahcatunca, can release us. This he did, just now."

The gray-haired chief sat down, amid profound silence. Naturally, Blackbird listened intently, and now read the riddle that had greatly puzzled him.

The tribe of Plain Crees have many curious ceremonials and superstitions. One of these is that when a war-party suffers severe loss, a fast is appointed, which no member of the party is allowed to break under penalty of death. They are also forbidden to hunt either beast or human being. 'Tis seldom they attempt to break this observance, for their superstition is great, and they firmly believed such disobedience would be promptly punished by Wahcatunca.

The seven braves who followed Blackbird were relatives, whose brother had been killed. Maddened by this fact, they dared the prophecy. Fox-foot had done the same, in hunting for the Omaha and his new allies.

This is the reason why our friends were left so long unmolested.

As the chief sat down, all eyes were turned toward Fox-foot. He saw that they expected him to report, and so rose to his feet, yet in such a manner that the fire-light fell mainly upon the side of his face, partially covered by the blood-stained bandage.

"Brothers—Fox-foot is here. He took the trail of the Omaha dog, and followed it long. He found fiends in white skins—men who rob the bands of the Plain Cree of their furs and skins. But their hearts weakened as they shed the blood of warriors. They have slunk away, like wolves when the hunter comes. Their lodge is empty—it stands by the Black Lake. Their toes point toward the south."

"If Fox-foot met no enemies, whose hand wounded him?" asked the gray-haired chief.

"His own. A panther snarled at him—Fox-foot went to shoot, and his arrow split. He has only one eye, now," promptly replied the disguised chief.

The Cree chiefs seemed buried in thought. Blackbird arose and left the lodge, unchallenged. Doubtless, they believed he was seeking his own lodge, to break his fast.

But the Omaha had no such thought. He knew well that, if Fox-foot had a squaw, she would at once detect the imposition. And this was his time, if it was done at all, to learn where Etiwee was kept. On that night he must free her.

The sky above was shrouded in a mantle of thick gray clouds. Only for the snow, the night would have been one of intense darkness. As it was, objects were dimly visible.

The fires blazing brightly before the lodge-doors of the oraves that had been slain, now befriended the Omaha. From force of contrast, the rear of the lodges was cast into almost impenetrable darkness.

Moving slowly through the village, the disguised chief seemed deep-buried in thought, but his eye shot keen glances into the door of each lodge as he passed. Still, he did not find that which he sought. Though he knew—if only from the words of the Cree chief—that Etiwee was in the village, he could see nothing of her now.

A number of the lodges were dark and still; the doors of these were tight closed. That they were occupied, the occasional glimmer of light, through some tiny chink or crevice, plainly told the chief.

With wonderful stillness and patience, Blackbird began his visits to these, stealing along like some spirit of the departed, choosing the darkest paths, carefully avoiding the observation of the few moving figures. With heart and soul fully interested in the quest, he paid no heed to the lapse of time.

At the back of one of the cabins he paused and listened intently. From within he could hear the faint, indistinct murmuring of human voices. Disappointed so often, a peculiar thrill now agitated his frame. It was as though something whispered in his ear that the lost one was nigh—that his stolen Etiwee was within this frail hut, almost within reach of his arms.

The lodge was built of small logs, chinked with swamp-mud and chopped grass, now hardened by time and frost almost to the consistency of rock. Not a glimmer of light was

visible upon that side. This cabin was an exception. The others did not lack ventilation.

At this moment Blackbird started, glared quickly around, then crouched close down beside the wall, one hand clutching his knife-haft. Then he waited impatiently for the explanation.

A shrill, angry yell had rung out upon the night air quickly followed by another of different cadence, that seemed a signal. Then a gradually-swelling murmur ran through the village, and dark forms flitted rapidly to and fro.

Blackbird scarce knew what to think; then he held his breath, as he heard some one leave the cabin beside which he was hiding. A quick glance showed him an old brave, as he glided by.

Acting on the impulse, Blackbird glided round the corner, hoping to gain a glimpse of the interior before the door should close; then he paused as if petrified. Two voices met his ear. The first—soft and silvery as the song of a blue-bird in springtime—said, speaking the Cree dialect imperfectly:

“What is the meaning of these cries?”

“That some enemy is prowling round the Cree village. But the dog will learn a lesson—his scalp will blacken in the smoke of a warrior’s lodge,” bitterly added another voice, harsh, cracked and dissonant.

At last Blackbird’s search was rewarded by success—he had found his squaw; the first speaker was Etiwee.

He sprung to his feet and took one step forward, her name trembling upon his tongue; but then he paused.

A number of silently-moving forms met his eye. He saw they were Cree warriors—that they were swiftly surrounding the village. He knew that were he to attempt the rescue then, discovery was inevitable, and discovery, to him, at least, meant death. Single handed, he could not fight the village.

Yet it was very hard to restrain himself. The one for whom he had dared so much was within reach of his arms, almost unguarded—for he knew that the old squaw was alone with Etiwee, as she would not have dared speak so sharply in the presence of a warrior. Still, with an effort that required far more courage than to have charged a score of enemies,

Blackbird checked his impulse, and drew back into the dense shadow.

At the same moment, he uttered a low, peculiar chirp, something similar to that of the bird he had taken his name from. Etiwee started and uttered a little cry. The old squaw, suspicious, demanded what had startled her.

"Nothing—'tis the cold. The wind whistles strangely to-night. Come—I have heard enough. I understand all, now," quietly returned the Omaha squaw, pronouncing the last words very distinctly.

With a smile, Blackbird heard them. He knew that Etiwee had read his signal aright. She would be upon the watch, now, ready to aid him.

But now he was recalled to a sense of the peril that seemed threatening him. A low cry came from one point, seemingly just without the village. It was taken up and rapidly passed from mouth to mouth, until the word ran entirely around the village. Blackbird understood its meaning. The surround was complete, the town was about to be searched.

He glanced quickly around. Near the council lodge he beheld a score of warriors, bearing lighted torches. Escape seemed impossible, except by boldly running the gantlet.

Then his eyes glistened. The second lodge from where he crouched, counting toward the torch-bearers, differed in one particular from those around it. Its roof, nearly flat, was dark and black—the others were white, covered with a thick layer of snow. He knew that this roof had been repaired since the last snow-storm, that the dark appearance was caused by the pine leaves.

To reach this cabin, he must pass over a space lighted by the bright glare of a fire. Yet he did not hesitate, but sprung forward, lightly, noiselessly, yet with the speed of an arrow fresh fired from the string.

Crouching beside the cabin, he listened intently. No warning yell announced his discovery. The move had been unnoticed.

Slinging the strung bow across his back, Blackbird lifted

his hands and passed them over the rough wall. A grim smile curled his lip. The task was an easy one.

With toe in one crevice, both hands in another, he drew up his tall form, and gained the roof. Gently he lay down, that the rustling leaves might not give the alarm. Upon the dark roof he trusted to pass unnoticed by the searchers, who would then believe he had fled from the village at the first alarm.

Blackbird was right in his belief that the alarm was caused by his presence in the camp. His disguise was now known to all.

The genuine Fox-foot had not set forth upon his mission alone. At the river-bed the two scouts separated, each taking up a trail. Fox-foot selected that leading to the cabin in the woods; his brother followed the trail of Kit Duncan, made as he returned from visiting the traps.

With wonderful skill the latter managed to keep the trail until it ended near the cabin. He discovered this and scented around until he saw the disguised chief and Kit Duncan steal away through the forest. At first he believed this was his comrade, but a sentence, caught as they passed, told him different, since it was English, and Fox-foot was ignorant of that language.

Believing his friend was still in the vicinity, the Cree did not follow the adventurers at once. Aided by the gloom, he carefully examined the cabin, listening upon every side. No sound reached his ear; he knew it was deserted. Passing round the spot, he entered the gully, the more effectually to conceal his passage.

Abruptly he sunk knee-deep in soft snow. His foot rested upon something that felt unnatural. He thrust down one hand, and felt the face of a corpse. Scraping the snow away, he carefully passed his fingers over the broad breast. The scars told him that Fox-foot had trod his last trail—that his brother was dead. And more, as he felt to see if the scout had been scalped, his fingers rubbed upon the stiff, short bristles, showing that the scalp-lock alone had been cut off. Not only dead—Fox-foot was dishonored.

Wild with anger, burning for vengeance, the Cree glided away from the spot, heading for his village. Gaining this, he

burst upon the council, shortly after Blackbird left the building, and rapidly made his report. Thus the imposture was exposed—for the capture of the daring man who had so deeply insulted an entire tribe, the cordon was stretched round the village, and torches prepared to search every inch of ground within its limits, while other braves were without to scour the neighboring hills and forest.

Rapidly yet thoroughly the village was searched, and yet nothing was found of the man who had so boldly bearded them; and from his hiding-place Blackbird looked down upon and laughed at their vain rage.

But his exultation was premature. He was discovered, and by the merest chance in the world.

A Cree brave was passing close behind the cabin upon the roof of which Blackbird had sought refuge; a twig of pine, loosened by the Omaha's feet, dropped upon the warrior's head. Instantly he raised the torch and glared upward, mechanically stepping out a pace from the wall. The rays of the torch fell upon a moccasined foot.

A yell of triumph broke from the Cree, as he dropped the torch, and springing upward, caught Blackbird by the ankle. Taken by surprise, before he realized the truth, the Omaha had slipped from the roof, falling heavily upon the Cree's head, both tumbling to the snow-crust.

The yell of discovery was taken up by a hundred throats, and the Crees flocked toward the spot. The danger strengthened Blackbird. He writhed free from the savage's clutches, and then plunged his long knife repeatedly into his antagonist's breast.

The yell of triumph changed to a death-gurgle. Blackbird instantly sprung to his feet and slipped the bow over his head.

All around was confusion. The snow crackled beneath the hasty tread of moccasined feet. The entire village was in an uproar.

Stooping, Blackbird tore off the Cree's scalp, thrusting it into his bosom. Then he pressed close against the wall, an arrow ready fitted to the string.

A number of Crees dashed past the cabin, then paused, evidently bewildered by the guiding yells so suddenly ceasing.

Blackbird did not hesitate. He knew that at any moment the dead brave might be seen.

Silently slipping round the corner, he darted away at top speed, heading toward the forest, with bow half bent before him. He knew that he must meet more or less of the Crees, since only the torch-bearers had passed by him.

Before he had cleared the cabins, a mad yell broke behind him, telling that the dead Cree had been discovered. And then, as he sprung out from the shadow of the last cabin, a cry from in front showed that he was seen.

Several dark forms sprung up from the snow-crust, and rushed to intercept the fugitive. With the long arrow drawn to its barbed head, Blackbird dashed on, unswerving from his course.

The shaft was loosed. One of the Crees went down in a heap, uttering his death-yell. It was answered back from the village.

Two Crees were within dangerous distance of Blackbird, being those whose stations were upon either side of the dead brave. The chief veered abruptly toward one of these, plucking an arrow from his quiver.

The Cree slackened his pace, and Blackbird heard the shrill twang of a bow-string. At the same time a twinge of pain in his side told that the weapon had not been sped entirely in vain.

Like an echo came a third twang—but the Cree went down like a log, a feathered shaft quivering deep in his brain; and then, with a defiant yell, the Omaha darted forward like a race-horse, exerting to the very utmost every muscle in his body.

As he ran he clapped one hand to his side, where the burning pain told of a wound. But the arrow was not there, and Blackbird knew that the wound was only skin deep.

He directed his course so as to pass wide of the spot where he had left Kit Duncan waiting his return, knowing that this would give Kit a chance to retreat unobserved. But this generous purpose was partially frustrated.

As stated, a number of braves had been sent out to search the hills and forest. A party of these now broke from the hills, and strove to cut off the fugitive, forcing him to bear to

the right in order to gain the forest first. This course would carry him within a few rods of Duncan's station.

Directly in his path, kneeling down in the shadow of the trees, was an Indian, with bent bow. His eyes glittered with a deadly joy as he saw the fugitive blindly rushing upon his death.

The bow was bent almost double — then the shaft was loosed, when Blackbird was within a score yards of the Cree. But instead of reaching the life of the Omaha, the arrow quivered deep in the snow at his feet, and the savage rolled upon the blood-stained crust with a bullet-pierced brain.

From the edge of the forest the shot came, its bright flash momentarily lighting up a dark figure. The Crees yelled with rage and divided. Instead of one, they would have two victims.

Blackbird leaped lightly over the writhing figure, and then plunged into the forest. A backward glance showed him two-score Crees following close upon his track.

He knew that it must be a stern race for life or death, where, barring accident, the best man must win. The enemy were too close at hand for him to hope to double, or give them the slip by hiding. Speed alone must determine the wager.

He felt little fear as to the result, provided no enemy lay in front. He believed he could out-speed any of the Crees, and knew that he could, if necessary, run day and night without rest.

Through the dense forest he dashed, tearing through such thickets as required time to skirt, leaping or scrambling over logs and brushwood, with an astonishing celerity and seeming ease. And even above the noise made by himself, Blackbird could hear the sounds of his pursuers following hard upon his track.

On thus for three miles, never once faltering, though bruised and bleeding from countless scratches, inflicted by the stubborn bushes and shrubs that choked his path. And then Blackbird leaped out upon the broad level of the river.

For some little time he had lost sound of his enemies, and hoping he had eluded them, he darted at breakneck speed across the ice-bound river, trusting to reach the further shore

unseen, where he would be safe beyond doubt. But before he was two-thirds across, loud yells from the shore he had just left told that he was discovered.

Still fleeing, Blackbird turned his head and glanced back. The Crees were upon his trail.

A cry of despair broke from his lips as he once more looked before him. An air-hole of unusual dimensions lay directly in his path. It was too late to avoid it by turning aside. Collecting all his power, he rose into the air.

His foot slipped—he plunged heavily head-first into the dark water, that closed over him with a sullen gurgle. The involuntary dive carried him under the ice, nor did he rise again, though the Crees watched for full an hour.

CHAPTER IV

THE YOUNG SQUAW'S WARNING.

TIME dragged heavily enough to the three occupants of the hollow tree. Old Kit had strictly cautioned them against conversing. Their new situation was novel enough to drive all thoughts of slumber from their heads for that one night, at least. And so, in forced silence, they watched and waited for the return of their friends.

The look-out's position was not the most comfortable imaginable, and Yankee Sam moved restlessly upon his rough seat—a sort of knot that protruded from the side of the tree, a short distance below a knot-hole, through which the cabin could be observed. Though more than once out in plain view, the Cree scout was not observed; he even rubbed by the hollow tree unheard and unseen.

Suddenly, Yankee Sam started and glanced down toward his comrades, though invisible in the gloom. A low, tremulous wail filled the air—rising, sinking; now faint and indistinct—now clear and sharp, then abruptly ceasing.

Grimes dropped from his perch, and the comrades instinctively drew closer together. In low voices, that were far from being steady, each asked the same question:

"*What can it be?*"

Touching each other's hands, they listened breathlessly. All was still save the quick thumping of their own hearts. For several minutes they stood thus, and then the strange sound again rose upon the air, closer than before.

With an impatient cry, Mitchell freed his hand, and falling upon his knees, thrust his head and shoulders through the opening in the tree-trunk. Then, as the sound died away, he drew back, laughing.

"Three men frightened at a panther! Boys, we mustn't let Old Kit get hold of this."

"Being in here, the sound changed," added Hall.

"I'll hev the varmint's skulp, anyhow," muttered Sam, seizing his rifle.

"No—remember Duncan's caution. We have duties of more importance now than killing panthers," hastily whispered Mitchell, restraining Grimes.

Sam yielded with an ill-grace, but he soon had his revenge. For half an hour all was still—then the cry of the panther again rung out, even closer to the hollow tree than before.

And this time its voice was not alone. A quick cry or half-shriek mingled with the wild notes of the forest-king.

Again the trappers started. Now it was sharp, short and angry. That alone, without the other voice, would have told them the truth—that the panther had found its prey.

But the other? It was not the voice of a man—the tone was too soft, and yet too shrill. Could it be that a child or a woman was abroad at that hour and in such a lonely spot? The idea seemed preposterous.

Mitchell thrust his head through the opening, and listened. His patience was not severely tried. Clear and distinct, seemingly from directly behind the huge tree, rose the angry cry of the panther—and then the trappers heard its claws tear the frozen snow as it launched itself through the air upon its victim.

Mingled with this, he distinguished the shrill twang of a bow-string, and heard the wild beast snarl fiercely, as though in pain. Then the human voice again—rising to a shrill scream.

"God of mercy—help!"

At any other time Mitchell might have wondered at this, for the prayer was uttered in his own language, the accent pure and distinct. But with a word to his comrades he sprung outside.

"Come—a woman is in danger!"

And his words were, indeed, true. As he sprung round the tree, Fred involuntarily paused, a thrilling sight before his eyes.

Half-supported by one arm, a human being lay along the snow. Standing on this was a huge, gaunt panther, one paw upon its victim's breast, the other half-raised, dropping blood upon the pure snow.

A feathered shaft quivered deep in its shoulder, and with low snarls of pain, the beast was snapping at it with its long, gleaming fangs.

This Fred took in at a glance, then with a drawn knife, he bounded forward, alighting beside the furious brute. It raised its head and growled threateningly, at the same time seeming surprised.

Then the keen blade hissed through the air and fell with a dull *thud*. Uttering an angry sound, the panther whirled around and hurled Mitchell to the ground, wrenching the knife from his grasp.

The stranger sprung erect and with raised knife bent forward. The blow fell, but it was needless. A whip-like crack broke the air—the scene was momentarily illumined by a bright flash, as Yankee Sam's rifle sent its bullet crashing through the panther's brain.

Almost unobserved, Fred sprung to his feet, brushing the red blood from his face. But this poured from the panther's veins, not his own. A couple of scratches upon the shoulder marked where the heavy paw had fallen—nothing more.

Hall and Grimes rushed to his side, putting eager inquiries, which Fred answered with a laugh. For the moment neither thought of danger connected with the rifle-shot.

Mitchell was the first to encounter the stranger, and turning, beheld a slight figure wiping a blood-stained knife. In the gloom but little could be learned by the features, but the form and dress told the young trapper his surmise was correct—a woman stood before him

"You are safe—you are not injured?" he asked, stepping close.

"No—thanks to you. A few slight scratches, that is all. But had you not been near, I must have been killed. I thank you—for life is sweet to the young," replied the stranger, in a low, remarkably sweet voice.

"You are kind—I deserve no thanks for acting as any man would have done. I am only too happy to have been of service to you, though I confess surprise at meeting a lady here, whose speech proclaims her of my own race."

"Thunder! don't be so darned polite, Fred," interposed Sam. "Ax her name, why don't ye."

The stranger laughed, low and with an amused air

"I am called Marie—but you mistake, I am not white—I am an Indian."

"An Indian—impossible!" cried Mitchell, in surprise, then adding, hastily: "Pardon me—but it did not seem possible that you could be an Indian, yet speak our language so correctly."

"Yet 'tis true. A white missionary—father René, who lived for years with my people—taught me. But this is wasting time, while you are in danger. I came to warn you. Flee from here at once—an hour's delay may be fatal. Indeed I do not know but it is too late even now. The Plain Crees have sworn to have your blood, for the death of the braves you have slain. They are many—you can not hope to fight them. Flight, instant and speedy, alone can save you. Go—at once. They can not take your trail until day-dawn. Before that you may have gained ground enough to reach Fort Pitt before them. And then, you are safe. Go—at once," hurriedly uttered the Indian maiden.

"We thank you sincerely for the interest you take in our welfare, but possibly the danger is not so great as you may think. If the Crees come here, they will find but an empty nest. Their game will have flown, leaving no trail behind them."

"No—you are the one who mistakes. You did not come from the cabin just now—then you have a hiding-place near. I know now—the hollow pine!"

"You know of it then?" and Mitchell gazed keenly at the maiden.

"Yes. I found it years ago. It used to be the den of a bear. I saw a cub run in there. A Cree brave killed the old bear. Fox-foot, at least, knows of the place, and will search there for you when the cabin is found empty."

"Does any other than Fox-foot know of it? I mean of the Cree warriors?"

"I don't know. But one is enough—"

"Do you know that this Fox-foot is *dead*?"

"Impossible! I saw him to-day, alive."

"He lies only some fifty yards from here. No—I did not kill him. He died by the hand of the Omaha chief, Blackbird. Before he died, he boasted that he had killed the chief's father. It was only Indian law—a scalp for a scalp."

"It is well. Fox-foot was a good brave, but a cruel enemy. Still, that does not alter your peril. Others may know of this hiding-place. You must flee, or give up all hopes of ever seeing your people again—and so young a brave must have many to look and wish for his safe return."

"Can I trust you?"

"Have I acted like an enemy?" proudly returned Marie.

"No—still you are an Indian. Naturally your sympathies are with them."

"In most matters, they are. But the good father René taught me to abhor bloodshed as a deadly sin. He is dead now, but Marie has not forgotten his words. What you say shall never be repeated by me."

"Very well. We have promised to assist Blackbird in rescuing his wife, Etiwee, whom your people hold *captive*. The chief and one of our party have already gone to the Cree village, hoping to set her free. For this reason we remain here until they return, let the danger be what it may. You understand?"

"Yes—but I am sorry. Your friends will never return. At dusk the Prophet relieved the braves of their vows, and now they are free to shed blood. Your friends rush upon certain death—the death that will surely overtake you if you linger here until day-dawn."

"I hope matters will turn out better than that," laughed Mitchell; then adding, seriously: "But it seems strange that

you should take such an interest in the welfare of those whom your people regard as enemies."

Marie hesitated, and glanced quickly at the young rapper. Then, as if by impulse, she said:

"I did not tell you the whole truth before. I am not all Indian, though my sympathies lie with them. My mother was a Cree, my father a white man—a free hunter. He was killed during a foray by the Blackfeet, and I was carried, with other captives, far from here to the village. That was years ago, but I can remember it all, distinctly. In this village I first saw father René. He was a missionary then, journeying from tribe to tribe, unarmed, fearing nothing, trusting in his God. Some of the Indians looked upon him as mad, and therefore an object of pity. But others knew him for a true man. He saw me at the Blackfoot village, and took pity on me. I told him my story, sobbing and weeping for my mother. He promised to restore me to my friends. He begged me from the chief, and then carried me in his arms clear here, walking every step of the long trail, living mostly upon roots and herbs. The Plain Crees learned to love him, though they did not always heed his teachings. Their love of blood prevented that. Father René taught me all that I know. He died with my head in his arms. But I can never forget him—I have never forgotten his teachings, and strive my best to live up to them."

Mitchell was not a little affected by this story, more, perhaps, from the simple, artless style than the words. He began to feel a peculiar interest in the maiden, the deeper that he knew she was partly of white blood.

What he would have replied, is not known, for at that moment came a startling interruption. A loud yell—a stifled cry—a brief, confused struggle; then all was still as death.

Flinging an arm around Morie's waist, Fred sprung behind the large trunk of the hollow tree, then drew his revolver. A faint rustle came to his ears, sounding from the interior of the tree.

This in a measure relieved his apprehensions. At the alarm, for the first time he had noticed that both his comrades were gone. He now believed they had retreated to their covert, to escape the intense cold.

Yet, if so, what meant the struggle? The yell, he felt assured, proceeded from the throat of an Indian. No white man could give utterance to such a wild, shrill screech.

Motioning Marie to crouch down beside the bush in silence, Fred noiselessly glided around the trunk, and tapped gently beside the opening, uttering a faint hiss. A low reply came, then the words:

"Is that you, Fred?"

"Yes, Alf. Is all safe within?"

"Yes—is Sam with you?"

"Sam—I supposed he was with *you*! Heavens! what can have happened?"

Mitchell paused, aghast. This discovery almost paralyzed him. The yell was uttered by an Indian. Sam was missing. Then he must have been one of the parties concerned in the momentary struggle. Yet, if victorious, why did they not hear something from him to relieve their anxiety?

Suddenly a light hand was placed upon his shoulder. He turned, with drawn weapon. But the pistol sunk to his side as he recognized Marie.

"Hist! there is danger in the air. Creep into the tree. You can make the best fight there, if you are attacked."

"But Sam—my friend?"

"If he is alive, he will come here. If dead, you can not aid him by throwing away your life. His fate rests in the hands of one powerful enough to guard him, if such is to be. Do not delay—the attack may come at any moment!"

"I will not leave you here alone. Should they find you here, even being a woman would not save your life."

"True—they would kill me, thinking I was a traitor. Life is sweet—I will go with you," calmly replied Marie.

"Enter first—you have acted like a friend, and we will protect you with our lives, if need be."

Without reply, Marie slipped into the hollow tree, slowly followed by Mitchell. No sound gave evidence that they were discovered by the enemy. The forest was still as death.

"Where is Sam?" whispered Hall.

"In the hands of God," solemnly replied Mitchell.

For full half an hour they remained motionless with ready

weapons, listening painfully. The horrible uncertainty told upon them terribly, until at length Mitchell could stand it no longer.

"I'm going to look for Sam," he said, determinedly. "You remain here, Alf. It is better so. Some one must be here to meet our friends when they return."

He did not wait for a reply, but slipped through the opening. Taking advantage of the dense cover, he cautiously scouted clear around the cabin, without making any discovery. Yet it was nearly an hour before he became satisfied that the enemy had vanished.

As nearly as he could guess, he went to the spot from whence had sounded the yell. A few moments' search convinced him that he was right. Upon the white snow-crust before him he saw a dark stain. Stooping, he examined it closely. It was blood!

Coupled with the disappearance of Sam, there could be no doubt as to its meaning. Here the Yankee had fell. But where was his body? If slain, why had he been taken away? If alive, why had he not made more outcry?

Mitchell started, aroused from these painful conjectures. A faint yell came to his ears. The next minute another, still nearer.

CHAPTER V.

OLD KIT ON HIS MUSCLE.

ENDOWED with an iron insensibility to cold that but few persons can boast of, old Kit remained at his post, waiting for the result of Blackbird's bold venture. The old trapper, knowing that there was danger of being seen by some straggler, drew himself up into a scrubby, thick-limbed tree, where he soon found a loophole through which he could peer out upon the village.

Since the chief's course after reaching the village would have to be shaped mainly by existing circumstances, Duncan had

only a general idea of how the rescue was to be effected. And this uncertainty rendered his position still more irksome, since he was kept in suspense.

From his leafy perch, old Kit caught a glimpse of the Indian scout, as he glided over the level space between the forest and village, though he little realized the peril this would bring upon Blackbird. Then he heard the angry yell, and could see that something out of the usual line had occurred. The uproar increased, lights began to flit here and there, borne by shadowy, phantom-like forms.

And then came the death-yell of the Cree brave stricken to the heart by Blackbird.

At the first alarm, Duncan had sprung to the ground, all alert, his eyes glaring, his frame quivering with eagerness, thinking nothing of his own probable peril, only of how he might best aid his friend. He noted a number of dark forms gliding over the snow, toward the hills and forest, but he knew they were Crees.

Crouching beside a bush, old Kit watched the town. He began to fear that the Omaha had indeed fallen a prey to his rashness; but then, as the death-shriek arose, the old trapper smiled grimly.

"The chief is at work, I reckon, judgin' by that. Durned 'f I don't b'lieve he'll give 'em the go-by, yit!"

Duncan sprung to his feet, with difficulty suppressing a yell of triumph. The figure of a man had just darted from the village, running at marvelous speed, and though the distance was too great for either form or feature to be recognized, Duncan felt certain it was Blackbird.

In a former chapter it is told how the Omaha headed for the hills, to avoid imperiling his friend, how he was intercepted in that direction, and forced back to the forest. Duncan, from his position beneath the pine tree, could see the entire play.

Suddenly he started and sprung forward a pace, half-raising his rifle. At the edge of the forest, but a few yards from his own station, a dark figure crouched upon the snow. The fugitive, in order to gain cover, must pass within a few yards of this spot.

A Cree brave knelt there, with notched arrow and half-

bent bow. Blackbird could not see his danger in time to avoid it. Death or captivity seemed inevitable.

But not so. The rifle of the scout rose and became fixed as a rock for a moment. And then, just as the stout bow was drawn to the utmost, the weapon spoke.

From temple to temple the leaden missile crashed. Without a word, the Cree fell forward, writhing like a wounded snake. The arrow, no longer held by the nerveless fingers, expended its force upon the snow-crust. Over the quivering carcass Blackbird dashed into the forest.

Old Kit heard the angry yells of the Cree braves, and read them aright. His action had divided their rage. To save his friend, he had placed his own life in danger.

"No use tirin' a feller's legs when thar's no need," muttered Duncan, as he slung the rifle across his back and darted into the forest.

He paused at the foot of a low-limbed tree, a few yards from where he had fired the death-shot, and seizing a bough, adroitly swung himself into the tree. With marvelous quickness this feat was performed, and when the maddened Crees broke into the forest, all trace of the trapper was gone.

Not for a moment did they dream of such a bold move—they dashed on, though no sound of footsteps guided them, confident that the bold marksman could not possibly escape them now. And from the tree Old Kit laughed silently at them, his eyes twinkling with fun.

In noiseless but great glee, Duncan laughed until the yells, growing fainter and less distinct, died away in the distance. Then his eyes turned toward the almost deserted village.

A faint hum, like that of a bee-hive, came to his ears. He could see lights passing to and fro, but he knew that there were borne mostly by squaws and pappooses. Nearly every man had joined in the hunt for blood.

Kit's eyes sparkled anew, and he started as though about to descend from the tree. But then he hesitated, finally settling down once more in an attitude of waiting. Unconsciously, perhaps, his thoughts found audible utterance.

"Durn the luck! Why cain't a feller see everythin' afore-hand, jest as it's goin' to happen? 'F we'd on'y knowed the chief was to be found out an' chased off by the hull outfit

the job 'd be done afore another hour, by me. It 'd be an easy 'un—the gal 'd be on the look-out, and most o' the buck Injuns is gone. 'F I on'y knowed her—or ef she knowed me, which is 'bout the same thing, come to think, I could do the job. But *I* don't 'nd *she* don't, so whar's the use?"

It may seem strange that Duncan did not at once improve his opportunity and return to his comrades at the hollow pine, 'since its coast might be called free, as the Omaha had led his pursuers nearly at right angles with the route he must take to gain the cabin. But Old Kit possessed good faith in the skill and boldness of Blackbird. Not for a moment did he doubt but that the chief would elude the Crees and escape unharmed.

Knowing, too, how precious time was to them, now that the Crees had evidence of their being in the vicinity and of their purpose as well, Kit believed that Blackbird would make another attempt that night to rescue his squaw.

"He'll double on the varmints an' make back tracks, for he knows 'most all o' the bucks is a'ter him. I'll wait—it cain't do no harm, an' he mought need my help," concluded the old trapper.

The night was still and cold, yet Duncan did not seem to feel uncomfortable, though his position upon a limb of the scrubby pine tree was somewhat constrained. He idly watched the Cree village, seeming to find a peculiar pleasure in listening to the wailing cries that at intervals arose from those who had lost some near and dear one. Old Kit was a true trapper. With but few exceptions, he believed that all Indians were a little lower than wild beasts, whom all honest men should crush beneath their heel. And to find a *lover* of the "noble red-man," you must go toward the setting sun—to those who know nothing of them save from books.

The village in a measure quieted down, though the sounds of mourning could still be heard. And yet Old Kit waited and watched for the coming of his friend the Omaha chief.

At length he started and bent his head in an attitude of close attention. But then the eager glow died out from his eyes.

"'Tain't him," Duncan muttered, still listening. "'Tain't him, 'less he's borried more legs. I reckon it's some o' the red-skins comin' back, tired out 'th thar run. Might 'a' knowed it 'd be so—the fools, to try that game 'th the chief."

The steady fall of feet upon the snow-crust had attracted Old Kit's attention. As he listened he knew that at least half a dozen persons were approaching, heading directly for the village; and the next moment he could just distinguish their shadowy forms.

As they neared his covert, Duncan could recognize, by their garb, the party as Indians. Then his heart gave a wild throb, and he fairly held his breath as he bent eagerly forward, peering through the snow-laden branches.

In their midst was one somewhat different in appearance from the rest, both in garb and manner of walking. A brawny warrior seemed to be supporting him upon either side. Was it a wounded comrade, or a prisoner?

The Indians abruptly paused and glanced quickly around. A suspicious noise caught their attention—a sound as of a half-stifled exclamation.

And such it indeed was. Eagerly peering down, Old Kit managed to catch a glimpse of the man's face that had first startled him. There could be no mistake; the long, thin, bony features—the yellow beard and long hair, now uncovered by hat or cap—could only belong to the tall Yankee, Sam Grimes.

This discovery was so unexpected that Duncan well-nigh betrayed himself, only partially succeeding in choking down the cry of wonder that rose to his lips. To see Grimes a prisoner, *alone*, was indeed a shock. Half fearfully he glanced at the waists of the Indians nearest him, to see if any fresh scalps dangled there. But the gloom prevented.

As the savages paused and glanced—as naturally appeared to him—directly at his perch, Duncan hastily drew back. One foot slipped, and he only saved himself from falling by quickly clutching at a stout limb, the effort shaking it sufficiently to dislodge several lumps of frozen snow.

This directed the eyes of the Cree braves, and they saw the limbs of the stunted tree slightly tremble. Even then

it seemed as though they believed the disturbance caused by some wild animal, rather than a man, since they were totally ignorant of all that had occurred at the village that night.

With bows in readiness, several of the party glided toward the tree, leaving Sam in charge of the rest. He seemed despondent, his head drooping with a dejected air. Yet his whole body was quivering with a wild hope—for he knew that friends were somewhere in the forest, and hoped that this was a signal to him to be on the alert.

Duncan saw the Crees approach, and realized in full the peril of his situation. If once discovered in the tree, he would be perforated with arrows. Nevertheless, he gave a thought to Yankee Sam.

Squatting down upon a stout limb, he drew his knife, and watched his opportunity. Not thinking of finding a human foe, the Crees advanced side by side, their bows and arrows ready, pointing curiously up into the thick-limbed tree, already half convinced that their suspicions were without foundation in fact.

Duncan measured the distance with his eye. He feared to wait longer, knowing that his only hope was in dealing the first blow. He saw that his time had come.

"Wake up, Sam—help's a-comin'!" he cried, in a clear voice, at the same time leaping boldly from his perch.

Like a panther he shot through the air, true to his calculations. Only a brief glimpse was given the Crees of their enemy, before he was upon them—literally so.

Duncan lighted with his feet fairly upon the shoulders of the middle brave, crushing him to the ground like a reed, at the same time upsetting the others. Lithe as a cat, scarcely had he touched the snow than he bounded up again, with heavy knife swung on high, and leaped toward where Sam had been standing.

Had been—but was not now. Grimes heard the warning cry, recognized the voice, and like a brave man, did not wait for more, but did the best he knew how with arms tightly pinioned behind his back.

As before stated, a brave stood upon either side of him, their hands upon his arms. Two others were near, watching the movements of their comrades by the tree.

Abruptly stooping, Yankee Sam, with a violent effort tore himself loose from the grasp of his guards; then, with a yell of long pent-up rage, he flung forward his far from diminutive foot, planting it fairly in the stomach of one of the Indians, dashing him to the ground in a heap, for the moment disabled. The other guard, with a yell, sprung forward and clutched Sam by the shoulder. Only partially succeeding in his attempt to break free, the trapper lowered his head, and used it as a butting ram, crushing the Indian's nose almost flat to his face, hurling him backward, confused, almost senseless. Thoroughly maddened, Grimes leaped high into the air, alighting with one foot upon the Cree's face, the other on his throat. A quick, snapping sound told that the neck was broken!

"Give 'em Peter!" gritted Duncan, with delight, witnessing Sam's exploits, all of which occurred in a breath, as it were.

Crack, crack! went the old trapper's revolver, and one Cree fell dead, his yell ringing horribly through the forest and over the level valley. The other Cree, though wounded, flung his hatchet at the nearest foe, and with a stifled cry, Grimes fell heavily to the ground, dyeing the snow red with the blood that flowed from his head.

Duncan saw his fall, and seemed maddened. With a yell wild as that of a wounded panther, and even more horrible in its deadly intensity, he sprung upon the Cree, clutching him by the throat with one hand, while the other thrust a revolver forcibly against his face. The weapon exploded, shattering the red-skin's skull like an egg-shell, covering Duncan's face with blood and brains.

At the same moment Old Kit felt a burning pain shoot through his arm, nearly causing him to drop the pistol. An arrow had torn the skin from armpit to elbow, then passing on to spend its force upon some forest tree. But at the time, Duncan believed himself severely hurt, and at once sprung behind a tree-trunk.

The alarm had been given the Cree village, and for several moments the uproar in that direction had been great. Recognizing the yell of their tribe, such of the braves as had been left behind when pursuit was made after the Omaha

chief, now seized their arms and hastened to the spot from whence the alarm sounded.

Their yells now met Duncan's ear, and he knew that a moment's longer delay might be fatal, even if escape was not already impossible. Believing his right arm disabled, he could not fight such heavy odds.

"Sam—up, boy, an' run fer it—the imps is comin'!" he yelled, loudly; but the only answer was the cries of the Cree warriors, and an arrow shattering the bark from the tree behind which he had taken refuge.

No sound came from the prostrate trapper. Insensible, if not dead, he lay there like a log. And the yelling Crees came nearer, while the survivors of the fight, gaining courage from this, skulked closer, seeking to gain a shot at this dangerous foe without exposing their own lives.

As Old Kit looked out upon the motionless form, a mad, wild longing for vengeance filled his heart, and for a moment he seemed about to leap out, regardless of risk, and dare all to avenge the trapper. For long years they had been bosom friends—for years had messed together, riding side by side as they charged the enemy, companions in scouting duty—friends to the core. It was very hard to leave him thus, but the thought of future vengeance nerved the old trapper.

Like a shadow he darted away from the tree-trunk and into the forest. But the shrill yells, as well as hissing of more than one feathered shaft in close proximity to his person, told him that the savages were after him. And then, not for the first time in his eventful life, Old Kit nerved his muscles for a long, desperate race for life.

In this his cat-like powers of sight stood him in good stead, and he avoided contact with the thickly-standing trees with astonishing adroitness. Through undergrowth, over logs and fallen trees, he leaped or scrambled, exerting his utmost powers to distance the yelling fiends that followed hard upon his trail.

He, as Blackbird had done before him on that same eventful night, gained the river in advance of his foes, and led on by the same hope, dashed swiftly over the level bed. But less than a score yards had been covered when a yell, shrill and exultant, told him that at least one enemy was gaining on him.

From Casting a quick glance over his shoulder, Old Kit saw that there was only one brave in sight. The Cree ran with marvelous swiftness and ease, holding a hatchet in his hand, as if for the death-blow.

A wicked light filled the trapper's eyes as he held his breath and dashed forward, the cold air seeming to cut his face, so swiftly did he pass through it. But the triumphant yell again sounded, as close as before.

The shore was now within a few yards, and the time had come for Kit to dispose of this troublesome customer, if possible. Abruptly checking his speed, he whirled around, holding a bared knife.

Startled by this unexpected move, the savage forgot his usual cunning, and hurled the hatchet at Duncan's head with an uncertain aim. Stooping, Kit allowed the gleaming weapon to pass unresisted by, and then sprung forward like a panther.

With the shock both fell to the ground, the Cree wrapping his long, sinewy arms tightly around the body of his foe, not having time to draw another weapon. But Kit was no child, and, despite his hampered situation, drove the weapon deep into the red-skin's side.

Breaking loose, he tore off the scalp, and then rising, waved it above his head with a shrill cry of taunting defiance at the Crees, now half-way across the river. Then he turned and plunged into the forest.

But Kit had no idea of continuing his mad race, at least in such haste, and seizing a low-hanging limb, raised himself into the dense boughs, crouching down, almost holding his breath. Yelling, the Crees entered the forest, then passed by, unsuspecting the ruse. And Duncan laughed in his sleeve as he saw them in pursuit of a phantom.

"'Twon't do to take 'em hot-foot to the cabin," Kit muttered, between the short, heavy breaths. "Though the devils got Sam, I'm in hopes the youngsters is saie yit. Any way, I'll soon find out."

In a few moments he descended from his perch, and veering to the right, set out for the cabin, knowing that before day-dawn a new refuge must be sought, and no time was to be lost. Half a mile from the spot, he crossed a small stream.

As he did so, an arrow grazed his side, and a wild yell told that he was discovered.

With tightly-clenched teeth he set forward, in the only direction now open to him, for both above and below he could hear the Cree whoops. A few moments later, he dashed out into the little clearing that surrounded the cabin, uttering the agreed-upon signal as he did so, then crouching beside a tree cocking his revolver and steadying it upon his left arm.

The foremost Cree made only one step into the glade. The pistol spoke, and he dropped, shot through the heart. With yells of rage, the others pressed on. Again Duncan fired—again death claimed a victim. And then the old trapper rose, grim and defiant, drawing his last pistol.

Two whip-like cracks—loud ringing cheers—and the Crees shrunk back before these new enemies.

CHAPTER VI.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

"HI-YAH! bully boys. Go fer 'em—*hi-yah!*"

The wild war-cry of Old Kit rung out, shrill and exultant, as the weapons of the young trappers sent death and consternation into the ranks of the Cree braves. With a reckless disregard of self he sprung forward, close followed by Hall and Mitchell, their revolvers playing rapidly, until the astonished Crees believed themselves greatly outnumbered.

An Indian does not fight against odds, at least very often, nor were the Crees an exception. With little cries of dismay they turned and fled from the glade, even faster than they had entered it.

"*Hi-yah—hi-yah!*" screeched Duncan, as he sprung forward in mad pursuit.

But a stub caught his toe, and he fell heavily forward, the hard snow-crust scraping the skin from his nose. When he scrambled to his feet, not an enemy was in sight, and in a

manner recalled to his sober senses, Old Kit retraced his steps to the cabin.

Mitchell and Hall were busily reloading their weapons. Half hidden behind a tree-trunk stood the lithe figure of Marie. A dark scowl distorted Duncan's features as he noted the Indian garb, and a hand fell to his knife-hilt.

"Hold, Kit! this is a friend," hastily cried Fred, at the same time springing between.

"A Injun—"

"She is part white—and a friend. She warned us that the Crees knew of our cabin, and that we were in great danger."

Kit stepped forward and bent his face close to the fair one of the maiden. Then he extended his hand, with the words:

"I ax pardon, gal. Your face is a good one. What you say, you'll do. I'm glad to meet ye—though you do consort 'th a or'nary set."

"Where's the chief, Kit?"

"Now you *hev* got me—never a know I know. He got into the village, kicked up a ripsnortin' muss, then got out ag'in, in a hurry, 'th a cloud o' Crees hard on his heels. Mebbe he got away—mebbe they took his scalp. I don't know. Things is powerful unsartin now'days."

"And Sam is—"

"Yas, poor feller, he's rubbed out;" and Old Kit's voice grew shaky. "I did all I knowed how fer the lad, but 'twarn't no use. His time was come—he got to the end o' his trail, an' the big trap sprung on him. Yas, Sam's rubbed out—but *I ain't*, an' this 'll be the blackest day's work fer the Crees they ever knowed on. I never was an Injun-hunter afore, but I'll be one now, an' hunt fer Cree scalps, like an Injun Devil a'ter traps."

In surprise the young trappers listened to this outbreak, nor could they exactly comprehend it. But then a few questions drew the facts from Old Kit.

"You have called me a friend," suddenly interrupted the Indian maiden, touching Mitchell gently upon the shoulder. "Then take a friend's advice. Flee from danger while yet

there is time. My people are maddened now—they will **not** be long in coming back to avenge the death of their braves. Brave warriors as you are, they will crush you at one blow—by force of numbers.”

“But the chief?” and Mitchell glanced dubiously at Old Kit.

“The gal’s right, boys; we’ve got to git out o’ here, double-quick. The varmints hev seen the cabin—they’d soon smell out the holler tree, an’ then we’d be gone suckers. We’ve got to hunt another hole—the sooner the better. I’ll leave a sign the chief kin read, ’f so be he ever comes back here.”

“I will show you a good hiding-place, if you are fully resolved not to flee for good. But there is great risk in remaining—almost certain death.”

“We kin trust you?” hesitated Kit.

“With my life, if needs be,” warmly cried Fred.

“Thank you,” simply replied Marie, with a grateful gleam in her lustrous dark eyes that caused Fred’s heart to beat a tattoo. “You are of my father’s people. That makes me your friend.”

“I’m a dirty fool—sech a critter cain’t lie like that. We’ll trust you, gal. How fur is this hole you spoke of?”

“Some three miles from here, among the hills. It is a small cave—but dry and tolerably comfortable. Come then—there is no time to lose. It is nearly day-dawn, and I should be back to the village before this. If they suspected me of aiding you, death would be my reward.”

“Then why return?—why not?” impetuously began Fred, but pausing at the maiden’s smile.

“Are *you* in less danger? No—my people are there, and I will not desert them, though many of their ways are far from agreeable. But come—”

We’ll git some grub fust. Boys, each take a chunk. Mebbe we’ll find use for it,” and Kit flung out several pieces of dried meat from the hollow tree, adding a warm robe for each of the party.

“Then you’ll not leave this neighborhood?” asked Marie, as she led the way toward the distant hills.

“That depends. ’F Blackbird is rubbed out, then we’ll

go. 'F he ain't, he'll stay until he gets his squaw back ag'in, an' we'll stay to help him. Thar it is, in a nutshell."

Marie said nothing further, but glided on through the forest as though deep buried in thought. Mitchell thought that never before had he beheld such a truly beautiful figure, so full of an easy, natural grace. And the foolish boy even tried to fancy how she would look presiding over some cosy western home; for instance, like the one he intended owning in due course of time. Not that he was *in love*—but given time and opportunity and there was no telling how soon he might find himself in that deliciously-miserable state.

The three miles was traversed without incident worthy of note, and the hills reached. Half-way up one of these, where a broad ledge or shelf rose around the hill, Marie disclosed the cave, well screened from view by a growth of bushes.

Into this the party passed, carefully obliterating all signs that might otherwise have betrayed their refuge. The interior was very dark, but the trappers now gained a fair idea of their new refuge, by the sense of touch. The cave, or rather den, was small, not over twenty feet in its greatest diameter, being merely a hole burrowed into the hillside, that, in days gone by, had probably given shelter to many a wild beast of the forest. A thick carpet of dried leaves and twigs covered the bottom. The sides were dry. By contrast the den seemed even warm and comfortable, after the biting cold without.

"Now, I have but little time to spare," cried Marie, "for the day is breaking, and I must not be found near this place. Is there any thing more I could do to prove my friendship?"

"No—you have proved it, a thousand fold," warmly said Mitchell.

"Thank you—but in time of danger you should guard your voice better," quietly returned Marie.

"Yas—thar is somethin'—or would be, 'f you wasn't some kin to the Crees," muttered Kit.

"What is it?"

"You do pritty much as you like, in the village?"

"I am free and unrestrained—yes."

"Then you could help the chief's squaw—Etiwee, he calls her—to git loose?"

"I might, possibly, but it would be difficult."

"'F 'twas easy she'd do it herself."

"You do not know whether her chief is alive or dead. What would you do with Etiwee, then, if the Omaha has been killed?"

"Take her to her people. We promised to help Blackbird—if he is dead, then the more reason we should not desert his wife," replied Fred.

"Wait—let me think," and Marie bowed her head.

She was seated nearest the cave opening, a robe wrapped around her lithe form. For several minutes she remained motionless, as though buried in deep thought. Then her head lifted, her ear bent as if in acute listening, while one hand rose with a meaning gesture that held the trappers motionless.

Repeating the gesture, Marie suffered the robe to fall from her shoulders, and then noiselessly as a phantom she crawled to the opening, gently parting the shrubbery until she could look forth. The faint sound of deliberate footsteps now reached the ears of the trappers, and they looked to their weapons, fearing they had been tracked to the den.

Marie started involuntarily as a warm breath fanned her cheek. Turning her head she saw that Old Kit had silently gained her side, and was peering over her shoulder.

In the gray light of dawn the form of an Indian could be seen walking slowly along the natural shelf, pausing at every few paces to glance deliberately around, though not with the air of one who suspects the proximity of an enemy. Seen in the dim light, the savage presented a remarkable appearance.

Despite himself Old Kit could not entirely repress a thrill something akin to awe as he noted the gigantic limbs and enormous chest of the savage Hercules. Never before had he beheld such a large man, so perfectly proportioned.

"'Tis Karawee, the Cree chief," murmured Marie.

"I kin drop the critter—just as easy," breathed Kit, his eyes glowing, his muscles twitching.

"No—harm him not, unless he first attacks you. If you could capture him now—"

"Fer what?"

"The Crees idolize him. They would be glad to give up any or all captives in exchange for their chief."

The savage by this time had gained a point almost opposite the den, and pausing with folded arms, stood gazing down upon the broad view spread before him. His back was toward the den—scarcely twenty feet away.

"I could crease him—jist so 's to stun the critter ontel we could tie him fast."

Marie glanced keenly at Kit. She suspected a deeper meaning beneath his words. But only truth and sincerity was to be read in his face.

"There may be others near; your shot would call them upon us."

"Nothin' resk, nothin' win. As you say, when we hev him, we hev the game in our own hands. He's my meat—shore!"

"Not to slay. If you kill him, I'll put the Crees upon your trail myself," firmly whispered Marie.

"Don't be skeered—you hev my word—an' I never lied to a woman critter yet," quietly replied Kit; then motioning for his comrades to advance noiselessly, he added: "I'm goin' to crease the varmint, so be ready to run out an' grup him. He's big aplenty to give us all a tussle 'f he was free."

Kit's rifle went to a level, Marie holding the branches apart to allow him unobstructed aim. With extraordinary care, Duncan took aim, and then fired.

With a wild cry, the Cree chief reeled and fell to the ground, the blood spurting from his head. Marie uttered a shriek.

"You've murdered him—he's dead!"

"No, he ain't. Out, boys, an' grup the varmint!"

Kit set the example, and seized upon the quivering form. As though his touch had galvanized the corpse, Karawee sprung to his feet with Duncan struggling in his arms. Then the old trapper was lifted above the savage's head and hurled over the ledge.

The next moment both Mitchell and Hall were upon the chief, who sunk to the ground, an easy prey. The effort of disposing of Kit seemed to have subdued him, and he sub-

mitted to be bound, unresistingly. The trapper's bullet had well performed the part allotted it, though a moment too late for Duncan's comfort.

"Finish binding him, while I look to Kit," hastily said Mitchell, feeling some little anxiety as to the result of Duncan's flying descent.

Despite himself he burst into a hearty laugh as he gained the edge of the shelf. Duncan was just crawling backward from a snow-bath, the violence of his fall having broken the crust. Anathemas, deep if not choice, issued from his lips as he rubbed the snow from his smarting face, down which the blood trickled freely.

"Laugh, ye pesky baboon," he muttered, testily, as he scrambled up to the ledge. "But try a trip like that, fust—*then* snicker."

"A frog, Kit—keep on and you'll make a fortune in the sawdust ring."

"*You* keep on, an' durned 'f I don't make somethin' else out o' you," growled Duncan, wiping his nose.

"Stop your spit-spatting there, and help me into the hole with this elephant," impatiently said Hall. "D' y' want to stand here until the whole Cree tribe spies us out?"

"Sound sense—ketch hold, Fred. Ge-long! but *ain't* he a scroudge!"

The chief was carried into the den, and deposited in the further corner upon the leaves. Then Marie softly called to Kit:

"You are a bold man—you have decided what course to follow?"

"Sartin; you gi' me the hint, an' I'm goin' to work it up. I'm goin' to the village, an' 'f they don't come to tarms, thar'll be a chief wantin' in the Cree tribe—fer shore!"

"If you escape being killed for the first minute, then all will be well. Karawee is their idol. They will sacrifice any thing for him. But you must have a token so that they will know you speak the truth. The chief wears a small silver shield upon his breast. Take that—hold it before them when they first see you. That will insure their attention. Well, I wish you success and a safe delivery from all danger, and now I must go."

The last words were uttered in a voice that seemed to falter, and the dark eyes flashed back to where the young trapper crouched. Fred sprung to her side, saying, impetuously :

"Do not go—this life is not for such as you are. Trust yourself in our care—on the honor of gentlemen, we will see you safely among friends."

"Friends? I have none save these, my mother's people. I am an Indian—I must forever remain one. What would I be—what could I do in your cities? Starve—or worse? No, my place is here—here I will remain. But you—I will never forget you, for you saved my life. And these, too, your friends. Should we ever meet again, remember this—in her prayers, Marie, the Indian girl, will ever remember you with gratitude."

Then, as though fearful of her own strength, the maiden darted from the door and glided rapidly down the hill. Mitchell gazed after her until the lithe, graceful form vanished among the forest trees. Then, unconsciously, a low sigh broke from his lips.

Alf Hall smiled significantly. He had "been through the mill," and fancied he had known of just such cases before; in other words, he believed poor Fred was more than half in love with the beautiful half-breed already.

Unheeding this, Duncan bent over the form of their prisoner, feeling for the silver shield. Karawee's eyes opened and shone up into his, with a peculiar luster, almost phosphorescent.

"Hellow! Woke up, hev ye?"

"Is Karawee a dog, that you bind him?" uttered the Cree chief, in his own language.

"No, he is a great warrior and a chief," replied Kit, in the same dialect. "But he has said the white hunters were enemies."

"If an enemy, kill me and take my scalp. A chief must not be degraded."

"I do not wish for your scalp—my lodge-pole hangs too full now. But listen, Blackbird is our friend—your braves took him captive last night."

"No—he is dead. The fishes of the big river are feeding

on his body," and the Cree's voice rung with a vindictive triumph.

"It is well—he was a true brave. But you hold his squaw a captive. She is our friend, too."

"Is not the yellow hunter a friend?"

"Your braves killed him last night."

"No—he was only wounded. But he dies to-night at the stake!"

Old Kit seemed petrified. Could it be possible that Yankee Sam had, indeed, escaped death? It did not seem possible, and yet the Cree spoke in earnest—his vindictive exultation could not be counterfeit.

"If the yellow hunter is killed, he will have a chief to keep him company," slowly cried Kit, suppressing his feelings as much as possible.

"Karawee is a chief; he can die," quietly replied the savage.

"That is as his friends decide. I am going to your village and tell the Crees that you are a captive. If they will give me the yellow hunter and the Omaha squaw, their chief shall come back to them. If not, he dies."

"Karawee will not be sold like a dog—strike! You are a squaw—a chief spits in your face!" and the giant struggled desperately to burst his bonds.

Old Kit detached the silver shield from round the Cree's neck, and then turned to his comrades. He had hoped to gain some message from the chief that would facilitate his task, but saw the folly of further talk.

"Now, boys," he said, in tones loud enough for the chief to overhear, in case he understood the language, "I'll give you your duty. You must stay here, and keep guard over the red-skin, for he's a slip'ry cuss. I'm goin' down to try fer Sam an' the gal. 'F the imps don't rub me out afore kin say the word, I think I kin do it, sence they think a heap o' the chief. Mind now, you're to keep close watch, both inside and out. 'F any reds show round here, keep this one's mouth shet—even 'f you hev to kill him. 'F I ain't back here by sundown, you kin sw'ar that I'm rubbed out. Then you kin pay off the chief, an' make tracks for the fort as fast as you like. Onderstand?"

"Yes—but you are running all the risk."

"Becaise I'm the on'y one that kin talk the lingo. But now good-by—'f I don't ever come back, jest tell the boys I went under a-doin' of my duty."

With a warm hand-clasp, Duncan left the den and descended into the forest, leaving his rifle behind, but taking both revolvers and knife. An hour later he stood gazing out upon the Cree village, having met with no enemies on the way.

Uttering a long, loud whoop, he boldly stepped forth from the forest and advanced toward the village. The yell was heard, and a horde of armed warriors sprung to meet him, others spreading, as if to cut off his retreat. Nothing daunted, Old Kit advanced, holding before him the glittering silver shield that was wont to rest over the heart of Karawee, the chief.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GIANT'S LAST TRAIL.

SCOWLING, muttering, clenching their weapons as though thirsting for the heart's blood of the man who thus braved them, the Plain Crees swarmed round the old trapper. Not shrinking a hair's breath, Kit Duncan held up before their eyes the glittering silver shield.

Cool and calm as he looked, Old Kit knew that his life hung upon a thread, and as he glanced round the sea of angry faces, even caught himself wondering how many of them he could rub out before going down himself. But then he saw the savages begin to wonder between themselves, and heard the words, "Chief—Karawee." He no longer doubted that his words would be listened to, even if not accepted.

"Who you?" abruptly demanded an old warrior, stepping close to the trapper.

"A man—I fetch a talk to you from your big chief," promptly answered Kit, resolved to hide his knowledge of the Cree dialect.

"What Karawee say? Where you git dat?" and the brave extended his hand as though to take the bauble, but Duncan would not permit this.

"No ye don't—chief said as how I must bring it back to him, when I got done 'th it. But come—it's pesky cold out here. The words freeze up in my mouth. I can't tell you what Karawee said only in the village."

"Where he—great chief?"

"In safe hands. But thar—I won't say a durned word more ontel I git a smell o' a fire," and Kit began resolutely pressing through the crowd toward the village, holding fast to the silver shield, his talisman.

This very audacity was his best friend. The savages suffered him to pass on, closing up in his rear, seemingly puzzled and confused.

Entering the village, Old Kit hastened direct to the square log-cabin used as a council-lodge, from the roof of which now curled wreaths of blue smoke. Shaking the silver shield before the eyes of the astonished guard, Duncan entered and crouched down beside the fire, then loading his pipe, he began smoking, lazily oozing the fragrant vapor through his nostrils.

The tumult without gradually calmed down, and the council-lodge was not long left alone to the trapper. Glancing idly at each, Duncan saw that none but the sub-chiefs and higher braves were present. The result of his adventure would soon be known. Despite himself Old Kit felt anxious.

It would be tedious to both reader and writer to give in detail the proceedings of that council. Each savage had his speech to make, and Old Kit was obliged to answer each and every one through an interpreter.

He told them that Karawee was a captive in the hands of his friends, who were to wait a certain length of time, and then to kill him, provided the Crees refused to grant their request. Then he proposed the terms, upon accepting which the Crees might have their chief again, well and sound.

Their captive, the yellow hunter, was to be given up to his friends. Etiwee, squaw of Blackbird the Omaha, also must be set free. Then the Crees were to pledge themselves not

to take the trail for twenty-four hours; after that they were free to act as they willed.

In this decision Kit held firm, despite all their attempts to shake him. Each condition must be fulfilled, or none of them.

"Which'd you rather hev—three skelps or the big chief?" he added, relighting his pipe and squatting once more upon his knees beside the fire.

Drawing to one side, the Crees earnestly consulted with each other. Duncan listened keenly, though apparently careless and unconcerned, and as the Indians believed him ignorant of their dialect, their tones were not so well guarded but that Kit could gain a fair idea of their plans. While asking time for consultation, the Crees intended sending their best braves out to scan the forest, to follow up the scout's trail if possible, hoping to thus find their chief, and so avoid losing their captives and the revenge that was so sweet to their savage hearts.

One of the Crees, an old and battered warrior, made known to Kit their resolve. The Crees must be given time to consult together; their Prophet would ask the will of Wahcatunca—then the white chief should receive their answer.

Old Kit arose and picked up two unstrung bows that lay near by, and stepping outside thrust them upright in the snow, a short distance apart.

"You see them—you see the two shaders? Wal, when them two shaders make on'y *one*, then I'll ax your answer. It'll be good two hours—more'n long enough, but I'll wait jist so long, an' devil a bit longer."

The old chief turned his head, and then motioned Duncan to follow him. Though knowing that this was but a move to keep him from noticing the departure of the Cree braves, Kit complied with the mute request, feeling confident that he had broken his trail too thoroughly for the Crees to follow it home in that length of time.

The Cree led Kit into a comfortable log cabin, where, to his great surprise, he met Marie. But a quick glance from the maiden's dark eyes warned him to be upon his guard—that they must not recognize each other. In fact, this old warrior was the grandfather of Marie.

With deft hands the maiden prepared a substantial lunch for the scout, while the Indian sat watching them closely, as he smoked his pipe. Thus conversation was utterly impossible.

Seated opposite, puff for puff, Old Kit answered the Cree, neither speaking, both waiting with apparent nonchalance for the two hours to pass by. Then Kit arose and put up his pipe, a steely glitter in his eyes.

"Time's up, chief. 'F I wait any longer my friends 'll kill your man. They're a long ways from here, and we must make haste."

Silently the Cree led the way back to the council-lodge. The two shadows were merged in one. Kit pointed at this, significantly.

Disappointed, yet hoping that some of their braves might yet return with the chief in time, the Crees tried to delay the matter. But Duncan cut them short.

"You've got to trust me in this. I give you the word o' a man that I'll send your chief back to you, safe an' sound. But 'f you send any o' your braves a'ter me to spy out our hidin' place, it'll be the death-note o' Karawee."

"You ask us to trust you, yet you refuse to trust us," retorted one of the council.

"Becaise I hold the trump keerds. You've *got* to come down to my tarms. But that's enough. Fetch out the yellow hunter an' the Omaha squaw, or shet us all up—no more foolin'."

Doggedly the Crees yielded. Their chief was idolized—they could not doom him to death for the sake of two or three captives, deeply as the tribe longed for vengeance.

Sam Grimes was brought forth, a sad-looking specimen of humanity—his face haggard and blood-stained, his hair matted with blood, that had flowed from a long gash upon the skull that laid the bone bare.

"Sam—you pesky varmint!" cried Duncan, rushing forward, and hugging his comrade with the fervor of a grizzly bear. "It's a sight fer sore eyes—we all thought you was gone under fer good, this bout."

"But what—you ain't a prisoner, too, be ye?"

"No more 'n you be—thar!" and Duncan's keen knife

quickly severed the skin thongs. "Now come along; but stop—whar's the squaw?"

"Here," replied a brave, leading forward a young and unusually good-looking Indian woman.

"Where you take me?" she asked, in the low, musical tone for which the Omahas are justly noted.

"To your man—Blackbird."

"My chief dead—*they* tell me so," sadly replied Etiwee.

"Then he's alive—fer a Cree never yit told the truth without its bein' a durned lie," bluntly added the trapper. "But come—the funder we git from here, the safer my ha'r 'll feel."

"I won't cry—the critters treated me like a dog," growled Sam, disgustedly.

"An' 'f we hedn't nabbed thar chief, you'd bin a barbecued one afore to-morrow mornin'," dryly observed Duncan.

"Look—they're 'scortin' us out o' town 'th faces like they was goin' to a funeral!"

"Thar hopes is buried, anyhow," chuckled Kit.

But his tune was quickly changed, and he realized the truth of the old adage—"There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." Just as his triumph seemed complete, came defeat.

A shrill yell burst from the forest, and made the hills echo again. A yell of angry, vindictive triumph—the yell of Karawee, the giant chief of the Plain Crees.

And then the giant chief sprung out from the forest and stood in full view of his braves and their late captives. All recognized him, and stood as if petrified with astonishment.

Then came the awaking, and with yells of exultation, the Cree braves dashed forward to secure their victims. Even above their cries the voice of Karawee was heard commanding them to capture the prey *alive*.

"Here—leg it!" cried Duncan, thrusting a revolver into Yankee Sam's hand, and then darting away with the speed of a startled deer.

But Sam's long, close confinement told upon him. His limbs were cramped and sore. The Crees ran two feet to his one. Kit, glancing over his shoulder, saw this, and slackened his pace.

"For God's sake, man, come on!"

"I cain't—you go—save yourself!" gasped Sam.

With a yell that seemed a signal, Karawee sprung forward, and then a full score of warriors left the forest, ranging themselves so as to cut off all retreat upon the part of the fugitives. At a glance old Kit saw the utter impossibility of escape.

"That settles it! Gi' the red imps thunder's long's you can!" and cocked his revolver.

For a moment the Crees faltered before the frowning weapons, but then the voice of Karawee was heard ordering them to charge. Desperately they sprung forward as one man.

Crack—crack—crack! The revolvers spoke rapidly, every missile finding a victim among the dense crowd that so madly rushed upon the two trappers and the helpless Indian woman. And then the trappers were borne to the ground by mere weight of numbers.

The snow-crust broke, and let them through into the dry, feathery snow beneath, now cast upon the air in clouds as the desperate struggle continues. Twice were the revolvers exploded, with a dull, sullen sound, as though their muzzles had been pressed hard against flesh.

Then one by one the Indians rose, the last raising the trappers to their feet, breathless, bloody and prisoners. At a word from Karawee they were securely bound, then carried back to the village.

"You see we exchange places," and Karawee laughed malignantly as he peered into Old Kit's face.

"How 'd you manage to git loose?" and Duncan vainly strove to conceal his anxiety as he asked the question.

"Who can hold Karawee a prisoner? Not the poor weak pale-faces, though they struck him from behind. But look! Can you tell me why the Cree braves are doing that?" he added, pointing to where the savages were forming in two long lines, ending at the council-lodge.

"It looks like running a muck," quietly replied Duncan.

"My brother is very wise. That is for him. He tried to run out then—now he can run all he wishes."

"Try an' break through, Kit," muttered Sam, as the chief

turned away. "Make fer the woods. The boys must be alive yit, or the devils 'd 'a' showed us thar skulps. Make it 'f you kin."

"I don't like to leave you here. 'F I got loose they'd make you pay fer both," persisted Duncan.

"'F yeou git rubbed eout, then I'm gone, tew. You git free, then you kin work fer me—see?"

"Here," muttered a low voice, and Marie bent over the old scout, slipping something into his bosom. "They would kill you—use it to save your life. Make for the woods, and God protect you!"

An angry voice called to Marie, and she glided away in obedience to it. By the feeling Kit knew that she had furnished him with a knife.

"I'll try fer it, anyhow. 'F they don't rub you out, Sam, keep awake to-night. I'll save ye 'f I kin. Then Marie 'll stand by ye, 'f it's so she has a chaine. Keep up your sperrits now, an'—"

As Karawee approached, Kit ceased speaking. It may seem strange that he should have used such confident words, speaking as though fully assured of his own escape, while every chance seemed against him, but his being so unexpectedly furnished with a weapon seemed to him a good omen.

Karawee raised the trapper to his feet, cutting the bands that secured him. With his gigantic strength the chief had no fear of Duncan escaping him. Holding Kit by the shoulder, he led him to the stand, some few yards from the first of the lined warriors.

"Now run—reach the council-lodge and you are safe for this day," cried Karawee, loosing his hold.

Like lightning Old Kit drew the knife from his breast, and plunged it into the broad bosom of Karawee, then turned and darted at full speed toward the forest. With a wild cry, the chief sunk to the ground.

For a moment the braves stood aghast. Then at Karawee's faint command, they dashed after the fugitive, now some rods in advance. As Kit neared the forest a wild whoop rung out, and a feathered shaft passed over his head, quivering deep in the breast of the foremost Cree. Another and another swiftly followed, with unerring aim;

and again the yell—one often heard before—rung out, clear and distinct. The Crees paused. They believed a ghost was fighting against them—the spirit of Blackbird, the Omaha chief.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO AGAINST TWENTY.

For some time after the departure of Old Kit, Fred Mitchell and Alf Hall sat in silence, a little removed from the entrance to the den, into which the cold air seemed to eddy. Occasionally they would peer out from their covert, but without seeing or hearing any thing to excite their alarm. The captive chief lay quietly upon his leafy bed, and only for the peculiar phosphorescent gleam of his eyes, might easily have been mistaken for a dead man in the dim, uncertain light that filled the den.

"Wonder how long Kit 'll be gone?" muttered Hall, yawning frightfully.

"For some time, I suppose. Why?"

"Because I'm cussed sleepy."

"So am I. See here, there's no need of us both keeping guard at once. One will do, while the other sleeps. We can take turns, an hour at a time. What say?"

"I'm agreed. Who goes first?" and Hall almost dislocated his jaw by a portentous yawn.

"I've got a pebble in one hand. You guess. The pebble sleeps—empty watches," holding both fists before him.

"Right hand."

"There it is. Go on and sleep as fast as you can. In an hour I'll wake you to relieve guard."

Hall needed no second bidding, but curling himself up in a robe, dropped almost instantly asleep. Then his steady breathings came to Mitchell's ears, with a tantalizing distinctness.

For over thirty hours he had not closed his eyes in slumber, and now he could scarcely fight off the drowsy god,

forced as he was to almost complete inactivity and silence, with a soundly-slumbering form before his eyes. Only by the most desperate exertion of will did he keep from falling asleep, and more than once he caught himself gently dozing off.

Yet he did keep awake, until he knew that a full hour had elapsed, by the change in the sun's shadow without. Rousing Hall, not without difficulty, Mitchell took his comrade's place.

With revolver held tightly in one hand, Hall took his position, resolved to nobly do his duty. But the shadows had not reached the passage of half an hour before the young trapper was sitting leaning back against the sloping wall, fast asleep, his nostrils chiming in the chorus sung by Fred's organs.

Through all the gradations, until Hall fairly succumbed, the bright eyes of Karawee were upon him, and his iron muscles were at work, though silently. Little by little the thongs gave way to the enormous pressure brought to bear upon them, until, now that Hall was soundly asleep, one superhuman effort burst them.

Hall stirred uneasily at the sharp sound, as the skin snapped, but then resumed his tranquil breathing; and then Karawee untied the strings that bound his feet, and was a free man once more.

For a minute he hesitated. Before him, sound buried in sleep, lay two enemies. Might he not succeed in killing them, even though he was himself unarmed? It would be another triumph—a just revenge for having been bound with ropes like a dog.

Probably had Karawee not been the great warrior he really was, he would have risked the struggle. But he knew that they were both bold, desperate men, not ones to be easily conquered. Nor was it to be supposed that he could slay one without awaking the other, when a pistol-shot would be the probable termination.

Karawee knew that before this time his people knew of his capture, and believed that they would spare no pains to ferret out his place of confinement, before relinquishing their captives, one of whom was already death-doomed.

Then nothing was more likely than that he would speedily chance upon some of the searchers, whom he could dispatch to the cave to capture the pale-faces. It was this last thought that decided his course. His revenge would be better satisfied by torturing these braves than by killing them outright.

Steadily, with a lightness scarce to be expected from one of his ponderous form, the chief glided toward the entrance, his eyes fixed upon Hall, his muscles strained in readiness to pounce upon him at the first symptom of waking. Fortunately, perhaps, for all parties, the trappers' slumbers were not disturbed, and the giant chief passed out upon the ledge. Then down the hill he glided, reaching the forest and then breaking into a swift run, eager to gain his village, and if possible entrap the bold trapper.

We have seen how his hopes succeeded—how Kit and Sam, together with Etiwee, were recaptured, and how the old trapper again broke bonds, leaving the giant chief weltering in his blood.

At very nearly the same moment that witnessed the going down of Karawee before the knife of Old Kit, Alf Hall opened his eyes with a start and glanced hurriedly around. His senses were more keenly on the alert, as will frequently happen when one has been awakened by some sleeping vision. He saw the slumbering form of Fred, but where was the prisoner? Hall rubbed his eyes in wonder—then, as the truth flashed upon his mind, sprung toward the rear of the den, with an angry cry. He stooped—one hand touched the discarded thongs.

"What's the matter, Alf?" cried Mitchell, starting up.

"Matter enough—the chief is gone—escaped while we slept."

This abrupt announcement confounded Mitchell for a moment, but then, as he realized the entire meaning of the words, he started into action at once.

"He's unarmed—we must follow and catch him. If he reaches the village first, Old Kit will be murdered. Come—he must be near—I had scarcely time to close my eyes."

"Longer than you think," muttered Hall, as he recalled

his persistent struggling against sleep. "But on—no need of looking for a trail, since the dog would make at once for his people."

Emerging from the den, the trappers eagerly scanned the expanse before them, but no sight of the fugitive chief met their eyes. At their feet lay his trail, heading directly to the forest below.

Down the hillside they rushed, slipping, sliding, and stumbling, then into the forest, hastening forward with as great speed as was consistent with safety, yet without overtaking the chief. At length they reached the Saskatchewan, and there paused, knowing that not a chance remained them.

"There! did you hear that?" suddenly uttered Hall, bending his ear.

"An Indian yell—most likely the chief has sent out some of his braves to unearth us.

"No—they would not be yelling so now, were we the only game. Perhaps Kit has given them the slip. But come—we'd better go to the den and secure some grub, then hide among the hills. It's like we'll need it before long. If Kit is free, he'll make for the hole first," hurriedly added Hall.

"Ha! they're breaking cover! 'Twill be a close race. On—do your best, now!"

The yells sounded more and more distinct, and as he saw an Indian spring out upon the river bed, Fred turned and darted away through the woods at full speed. Knowing that no pains would be spared to find them, the trappers felt the folly of seeking another hiding-place without being provided with food.

Back to the hill-foot the friends raced side by side, then commenced the ascent at a more moderate pace. They believed they had left all danger far behind. But when near the ledge, Hall glanced back over his shoulder.

"Ha! the devils have found us! Up, quick—maybe they haven't seen us yet!"

"There it is—!" muttered Fred, as a shrill, triumphant yell came to his ears from below. "Spare your breath—we can't run for it. These devils have us foul among these hills, and we'd only run into a trap. Better fight it out up here—I doubt whether we'll find a better place."

"You're right," and with an effort Hall recovered his usual coolness. "Fight it is—and we'll give the red devils a belly full before going under. If they wear my scalp, they must earn it first!"

"Possibly they don't know of the cave?"

"I wouldn't build on that. Most likely that cursed chief leads them."

"I can't see any thing of him among them," said Fred coolly glancing backward, before following Hall over the ledge to the hole.

The Indians appeared to have noticed this cool behavior, and slackened their pace, spreading out as if to lessen the work. And then they swarmed up the hill.

Carefully replacing the bushes, our friends crouched down in the cave entrance with ready rifles and pistols. They saw the foremost of the savages peer cautiously over the ledge, as though fearing an ambushed volley; but then, as if reassured, step boldly upon the ledge.

There was full a dozen in all, each one armed with a rifle, in addition to bows and arrows and side-arms. Yet, though the odds were so great, the trappers did not appear badly frightened. They knew that only dauntless courage could avail them aught now, and resolved to meet the issue like true men.

"They'll go by—they think we've fled. I don't believe they know of this hole," muttered Fred.

"Hist! They have ears like— Ha! they see the trail—the blood-drops when we carried the chief in here!" hissed Hall, raising the muzzle of his rifle.

It was but too true. Only for this it is quite probable that the Crees would have passed on, thinking their prey had fled further, for the hard-frozen snow-crust did not retain a trail with any distinctness. But the tiny red drops of blood led from a small patch of the same, directly toward the clump of stunted pines that veiled the den entrance.

The trappers interchanged glances. Discovery was inevitable. They both considered it wisest to deal the first blow, and raised their rifles.

Crack—crack; two reports almost as one, and the two foremost braves drop dead without so much as a groan, their

blood dyeing the white snow crimson. And thus, while the survivors stand confused and bewildered, the revolvers of the trappers begin to play their deadly music, manipulated by cool and experienced hands who made every shot tell.

With yells of terror the surviving Crees turned and fled from the spot of death. But few of them had ever heard of the revolver—still fewer ever beheld one, so it is not strange that they greatly magnified the number of their assailants.

"Load up, Alf," muttered Fred. "They'll be back again when they see no one pursues them."

"*Four* of 'em won't, anyhow," grimly remarked Hall, glancing at the bodies that spotted the snow. "And some others tasted our lead, or I'm mistaken."

"Never fear; we'll have enough of it, I'll warrant. They'll send to the village for help. We may as well make up our minds that this bout ends matters, as far as we're concerned," gloomily said Mitchell, as he rammed home a bullet.

For nearly an hour they watched and waited, without hearing or seeing any thing of the Indians, but fortunately they were not deceived by this apparent security. Then Fred hastily leveled his rifle and fired.

A shrill death-yell told how true had been his aim. Then, after a moment's stillness, the hills seemed rent with whoops and shrieks, and, as with one accord, the Crees dashed toward the den. It was evident that they had been strongly reinforced, since they numbered more now than when first seen.

Crack! crack! crack!

Shot after shot was fired. Death-yell echoed death-yell. The savages madly tore and trampled down the bushes, their dead beginning to block up the entrance.

CHAPTER IX.

DOES THE GRAVE GIVE UP ITS DEAD?

IN rapid succession the death-dealing arrows shot from the forest while high above the shrill cries of agony rose the thrilling whoop—the war-cry of Blackbird, the Omaha chief!

The Crees recognized it—and they seemed panic-stricken: so horrified that they did not even possess the power of fleeing from the spot. Remembering how the Omaha had fallen into the water, and though they watched the air-hole for an hour, he had not arisen, their superstition told them this was his spirit come to avenge his death in the flesh.

Old Kit also recognized the cry, but it acted different with him. A valued friend was alive—a strong ally aroused.

Heading directly for the point where the arrows broke through the line of undergrowth, he sprung into the covert and stood face to face with Blackbird. Instinctively the hands met in a fervent grasp, but that was not the time or place for explanations.

A deep, sonorous bellow, not unlike that of a wounded buffalo bull, overtopped the chorus without, and peering through the bushes, the friends saw Karawee rushing up, ordering his braves to follow the escaped captive. Blackbird fitted another arrow to his bow, but the shaft was not discharged. Karawee sunk helplessly to the ground, the blood gushing from his chest where Old Kit had plunged his knife.

“Mind—the varmints is spreadin’ out to git around us—we’d better make tracks, chief,” hastily uttered Duncan.

“Come, then, we will make big fools of the Cree dogs. They think that Blackbird’s spirit is fighting them. But come—keep in my trail.”

The chief turned and glided rapidly forward, closely followed by Old Kit. They had traversed several hundred yards before a sound came from their foes; then a long, angry yell told that the Crees had discovered their flight, and were in hot pursuit.

"Now—the Cree dogs come, but they chase the wind," briefly said Blackbird, darting forward like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow.

Old Kit's mouth and eyes opened wide in astonishment. The chief ran with seeming ease, and yet with a speed that Duncan could not equal, justly proud as he was of his locomotive powers. With every muscle exerted to the utmost, Old Kit ran on, but with each moment the Omaha was leaving him further behind. As if just noticing this, Blackbird glanced back over his shoulder, and then slackened his pace. Feeling no little mortification, Duncan brushed up alongside him.

"Listen," uttered the chief, in an even tone, scarcely disturbed by his furious pace; "we will throw dust in the eyes of the Crees. We will hide from them, and then when they go by, we can choose another trail until night comes. Then Blackbird must set Etiwee free."

"All right—go ahead—you're boss jest now—I'll foller," jerked out Old Kit.

With an upward glance, Blackbird slightly altered his course, then pressed on with unflagging speed. From behind them arose yell after yell, as the Crees followed the hot trail, easily traced on that bright day, since each footstep destroyed the brilliant gloss upon the snow-crust.

Five minutes after discharging his last arrow at the Crees, Blackbird sprung out upon the river. He was following precisely the same course he had taken upon the night when he fell into the air-hole.

But upon nearing the further shore, he veered to the left, thus rounding the air-hole in safety. Turning his head, he beheld the Crees just leaping upon the river-bed, and hurled at them a taunting yell of defiance.

They had crossed the river at a point where a broad but comparatively shallow creek runs into the Saskatchewan. The turbid river, after overflowing, had formed a sort of miniature bay at the mouth of the creek, and the beavers had taken advantage of the fact to construct themselves a dam and village there, though long since nearly depopulated.

To Old Kit's great surprise, Blackbird ran hastily to one of

these huts and dextrously moved a portion of the snow-crust, revealing a dark hole where the frozen earth had been cut or broken away. Then he hastily said :

"Come in, Kit. This is the hiding-place of Blackbird."

A dim light glittered through the snow-crust, and showed Old Kit the kind of a place they had sought refuge in. As the mound proclaimed, it was a beaver den, in good repair. The sides were hard frozen, but the lower portions somewhat damp. A faint muttering sound came to his ears—the sound of the Saskatchewan rolling by in its icy prison.

This sound abruptly increased, until the walls of the beaver-mound seemed about to fall in. Old Kit glanced anxiously at the crust-cave above their heads. He knew that the Crees were dashing by in hot chase of an imaginary fugitive, and he half expected to see one of them stumble into the den, so near did their moccasined feet resound.

Blackbird smiled reassuringly. He knew that snow was a good conductor of sound. The Crees might not be within a dozen yards of their covert.

Then this sound died away, and Duncan began to breathe more freely. Their situation, too, was more comfortable than might be thought. Beneath the snow it was much warmer than out in the open air, though a disagreeable dampness came up from the muttering river.

"How 'd you find this hole, chief?" asked Kit, curiously. "I'd never 'a' thought o' sech a trick."

Blackbird smiled. Only for a very curious accident *he* would never have thought of such a covert. Then in as few words as possible he told Kit the story of his adventures since first entering the Cree village.

The reader will remember at what point we lost sight of the chief—just as he sunk beneath the chilling waters of the Saskatchewan, having slipped while attempting to leap across the air-hole.

He was already heated by his race, and the icy water nearly deprived him of his senses. Fortunately, he was not seized with the cramp. He sunk deep down, before he even partially recovered from the horrible shock, but then rose quickly.

His head struck evidently against the smooth ice! He had been swept below the air-hole. In the horrors of drowning he forgot that certain death awaited him without, and turning in what he believed the right direction, swam forward with all the energy possible, hoping to gain the air-hole before becoming exhausted for want of breath.

Providence guided him in this desperate struggle. Instead of toward the air-hole, he was heading directly away from it. The current he felt against his breast was that of the creek sweeping down to join the river.

He was nearly exhausted. His brain seemed bound round with red-hot iron. His heart throbbed as though about to burst. His lungs seemed filled with liquid fire. Millions of stars danced before his closed eyes. And yet he swam on, striking out with frantic energy, cleaving the icy water like a fish.

Then one hand struck against something solid. A strange noise met his ears, and then several objects brushed hastily past him. Startled by this strange encounter he plunged madly forward—then, with a muffled gasp, opened his mouth. Instead of water, it received *air*—not pure, but at that moment how delicious!

Half-senseless he lay thus for several minutes, but then recovered sufficiently to feel a curiosity as to where he was. Eyesight was useless then. All was dark as midnight.

His outstretched hands rested upon something hard and smooth—earth, as he knew. The slope—the peculiar smell, told him the truth. *He was in the winter house of a beaver!*

Such was indeed the case. Chance—or rather the Providence that rules over all—had guided him to this refuge. The beavers had fled at his approach—it was their bodies that brushed against his form at the sub-aquatic entrance.

He found no difficulty in breathing, though how the air was supplied he knew not, nor did he trouble himself about such thoughts. Enough that it was so.

For an hour or more he waited patiently, for he knew that the Crees would not easily give up their hopes of gaining his scalp. Then, with his knife he set to work. It was slow work, and by patience and perseverance he finally suc-

ceeded. The hard, frozen ground gave place to fine snow, and Blackbird could see the light of day glimmer through the crack.

Then, for the first time, the idea of making this his hiding-place, while working to free Etiwee, occurred to him. The debris he pushed back through the passage to the water, where it was forever swept away. Then he carefully cut through the snow-crust so that it could easily be replaced in one piece, to act as a cover.

He set out for the trapper's cabin, but found it deserted. He overlooked the signs left for him by Duncan, and then set out to reconnoiter the Indian village, having found the blood-traces left by Yankee Sam's capture, and from that deduced the worst. He arrived just in time to assist in Old Kit's escape.

Duncan had been deeply absorbed in this story, and for the moment forgot the peril that threatened his comrades in the hill den. But then, as he briefly sketched the events of the past few hours, he added :

"The big Injun 'll be sure to send to take the boys. We must try an' help 'em, though I'm dub'ous it's too late. An' then, I'm unarmed—hain't got even a toothpick."

"The blind Crees did not find their brave that died in the gully. He had knife, tomahawk, and bow and arrow. We will get them. It is only a few steps from here."

"I used to pull a fa'r bow; mebbe I hain't forgotten it all yit. Anyhow, they'll be better 'n nothin'. But h'ist the kiver—we don't want to waste no time."

Blackbird cautiously raised the snow cover, and peered forth. The coast was clear; not an enemy in sight. They had passed on, unsuspecting how narrowly they had missed their prey.

A minute later Duncan was testing the weapons of the dead Cree. The bow was a good one, the quiver full of steel-headed arrows. The steel weapons were only tolerable.

"Wal, they're better 'n none. Come on, chief. It's a good bit to the hole, an' I'm fearin' we're too late now."

Kit set out at a long, swinging lope. Blackbird made no reply but followed his lead slowly.

A minute later Kit paused bending his ear. Several

quickly succeeding reports came faintly over the forest. The young trapper was attacked!

"Now for it, chief—do your best—I'll keep up or bu'st somethin' a-tryin'!" gritted Kit, as he darted forward with redoubled speed, keeping beside the Omaha.

Five minutes of this breakneck speed carried them to the edge of the forest. Pausing here, they peered out upon the hill. Below the ledge they could distinguish fully a score of warriors, gliding to and fro, or eagerly consulting in little knots.

"They have not taken our friends yet," muttered Blackbird.

"No, that's plain—but they will unless we take a hand in. But how? They'll see us the very fust step we take out there."

For answer Blackbird pointed to a narrow but deep gully that led, crescent-shaped, around the point of the hill. Kit saw that by this they could gain the ledge unobserved by the Crees.

Into the gully they crept, and then glided rapidly along, keeping well concealed. Gaining the hill's base, they began its ascent upon the side opposite the savages, well protected by cover.

They had nearly gained the position selected, when the Crees made their second rush, this time resolved upon conquering. The shrill yells—the report of firearms—the cries and groans of the dying, told that the crisis was at hand.

"Wait," and Blackbird checked Duncan, "you will spoil all. Follow me. From the bushes yonder we can rain death upon them unseen."

The bush was gained, and side by side the friends bent their bows, with other arrows stuck upright in the snow before them. The distance intervening was scarce ten yards. And in the crowded mass before the cave, an arrow could not fail in finding a victim.

Twang, twang—twang, twang! The strings rung shrilly upon the breeze. Arrows seemed to fill the air. Cree after Cree fell back, transfixed with feathered shafts. A yell of surprise and dismay went up from the survivors.

Answering it came the shrill war-cry of the Omaha—the

wild *hi-yah!* of the old trapper, and still the death-dealing arrows sped upon their mission.

Mad with terror, the Crees turned and fled in hot haste.

And then the friends were reunited, clasping hands in fervent thanksgiving for their marvelous escape.

CHAPTER X.

THE HALF-BREED'S CHOICE.

WHEN the desperate rush was made by the Crees upon Old Kit and Yankee Sam, Etiwee was borne to the ground and secured with the others, though otherwise she was better treated, for a very good reason. Karawee had led the Crees in their attack upon the Blackfoot town, when Etiwee was there a captive, and seeing her, had taken a strong fancy to her. So it was that the Omaha squaw was numbered among the other captives taken on that raid.

First the penance imposed upon him as well as the lowest brave to satisfy the dead, then the trouble with the Omaha chief and his white allies, had kept Karawee from claiming her as his squaw. But now the Cree chief resolved to precipitate matters, lest the Prophet should number her among the sacrifices necessary to propitiate the angry Wahcatunca, and as Karawee's squaw he would not dare have such a "vision."

When Karawee fell the second time, it was more from loss of blood than aught else, for as he was carried to his own lodge, the Medicine man pronounced the wound by no means dangerous. As soon as his wound was dressed, the chief dispatched a brave to command the immediate presence of Sastarexy. In a few moments an aged Indian entered, his hair silvery white, his form bowed and bent.

This was the grandfather of Marie. In times gone by no Cree warrior had been more loved by his people or hated and feared by their enemies.

Silently he stood beside the low pallet that supported the

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wounded chief. Karawee's face was distorted by a deep frown. Sastarexy saw that something had gone wrong.

"Where was the daughter of Matiwan and the white trader last night?" he abruptly demanded.

"At the lodge by the red rock."

"Does Sastarexy *know*?"

"She told me this—is Marie's tongue crooked?"

"Yes! she lied to you—she is a traitor; she would have saved the white dogs from the vengeance of the Crees; she bade them capture me, that they might buy back their friends through the love of my braves! This is what Marie has done!" vehemently cried Karawee, in great apparent excitement.

"Does Karawee *know* this?"

"He has eyes—he has ears. He knows what he sees and hears."

"Then I have no child. The blood of Sastarexy, once chief of the Plain Crees, is not traitor blood. The squaw is a traitor—let her die as she deserves," coldly returned the old man, his face motionless as marble.

"Sastarexy knows what that death is?"

"The false tongue torn out—the body burned to ashes."

"Good! But listen. The dream spirit came to my eyes last sleep, and whispered strange things to me. It said if the Crees sacrificed the half-and-half squaw, out of her ashes would rise up a big snake that would prey upon the Plain Crees until not one was left—the earth should know them no more. Then it added: 'Oh, chief! upon you rests the future welfare of your tribe. Take this squaw to your lodge—let her be the mother of your children, and all will be well. Wahcatunca will be satisfied—the Plain Crees shall grow strong and rich, and never fail in battle.' These words did the dream-spirit speak to me; then he went away."

"It is well. The voice of Wahcatunca speaks in dreams, and must be obeyed. Marie shall enter Karawee's lodge as his squaw," promptly replied the old savage, doubtless pleased to get rid of the dilemma so easily.

"Good! Send the maiden to me, that I may tell her the will of the Great Spirit," and the eyes of the giant chief glittered with ill-concealed triumph.

Sastarexy silently withdrew, but returned in a few moments, followed by Marie. For a moment Karawee seemed about to dismiss him, but if so, he thought better of it.

"Child, where were you last night?" he abruptly demanded, yet in a softened tone.

Marie hesitated, glancing quickly at his face. Something that she saw there determined her to tell the whole truth, for she now felt assured that the chief had recognized her in the cave, though until now she believed she had escaped being noticed.

"I was with friends."

"Are you really Matiwan's child—and yet claim as friends the bitter enemies of your mother's people?"

"I am both Cree and pale-face. My mother taught me to love her people—good Father René taught me to love every person, whether their skin be red, white or black."

"Yet I saw you with our enemies—with the pale-faced hunters who, not content with robbing our hunting-grounds of meat and furs, hunted the Plain Crees, killing many of our best braves! Child, were I to breathe aloud what I have seen, what would the Crees say? That you were a traitor—that the blood of Sastarexy and Matiwan had vanished from your veins, leaving only that of the pale-face. And they would say, let her die—die the death of a traitor!"

"I am no traitress."

"Did you not warn them of our plans?"

"Yes—because I wished to prevent bloodshed. I told them to flee—to return to their own people and never return here to trouble us. I could do no less, after the service they rendered me."

"Service?"

"Yes. I was returning from the lodge of our friends by the red rock, a panther sprung upon me. A pale-face came to my help and killed the beast, at the risk of his own life. Could I do less than tell them of their great danger?"

"Yes—you could have let them die," coldly interposed Sastarexy.

"You led them to the hole in the hill?"

"Yes."

"And was there when they struck a chief from behind?"

Marie bowed in silence. She saw the folly of further justification, since the chief already knew enough to condemn her, if such was his purpose. But something in his tone and looks alarmed her. She felt that he was gradually approaching something terrible.

"You told them who I was—you bade them take me captive? *You gave the old hunter the knife that he drove through my breast!*"

Marie started at this last charge. Karawee smiled exultingly, as he noticed the change. His guess had hit home; for guess it was.

"And now if I speak this—if I tell our people all that you have done, what will they decide?"

"Death, I suppose," quietly.

"Yes—but in what way? Listen—I'll tell you. They will call you a traitor—they will give you the death of a traitor. You will be first tied to a post and whipped by the squaws. Then your tongue will be cut out. And then you will be burned to death at the stake!"

Marie shuddered. Schooled, as she had believed herself, to endure the sentence of death, such horrible cruelty as this had never entered her mind. Karawee smiled again as he noted her agitation. He felt sure of his victim now.

"This is the doom—that which has lived among the Plain Crees since the snows first fell, since water first ran—since the Wahcatunca first breathed upon nothing and made the world. If I but open my lips—breathe one word of this to my people, what will become of you?"

"I can die. But why tell me this? Why not speak the words—why have you sent for me here?"

"To learn if you were repentant—if you were sorry for having acted against your people."

"I am not sorry—what I did then, I would do again, under the same circumstances. I do not say that I am ready to die—life is sweet, especially to the young—but I will not die with a falsehood upon my lips," firmly replied Marie.

Sastarexy started forward with uplifted hand, but Karawee motioned him back.

"You asked why I did not speak aloud the words that would condemn you to death. I tell you now, I would ~~save~~ *save* your life. I *will* save it—on one condition."

"And that?—"

"Remember, I give you an opportunity to make a favor of what, as your chief, I might demand: I ask you to enter my lodge as my squaw," rapidly uttered the chief.

Marie started, though the preamble had given her some idea of what was to come. Fortunately she checked the reply that rose to her lips. She knew that this man held her very life in his hand, where a breath would blow it to atoms.

"I am too young to have thought much upon such matters," she slowly replied, the words shaping themselves with difficulty. "And then you have called me a traitress. Is such a person fit to enter the lodge of a great chief?"

"You will think as I do, then. But your answer? Shall I smother the spark, or blow upon it until it springs up and devours you?"

"Give me time to prepare my mind for the change, then."

"Until this time to-morrow; to-night we will be busy. The yellow hunter dies at the stake. Go now, and keep close to your lodge," and Karawee motioned them away.

Marie hastened into the lodge to escape the scoldings of her grandfather at her hesitating for a moment in accepting the proposal, when the great chief had treated her with such unusual kindness. And, indeed, Karawee had greatly descended from his dignity, but this was because he well knew the principles father René's teachings had implanted in the maiden's mind.

Marie was not a little surprised at finding Etiwee in the lodge, and as they had already become quite good friends, the meeting was pleasant upon both sides. They were pretty soon left to themselves, the wrinkled, toothless hag stepping out, doubtless to indulge in a bit of gossip on the exciting events of the past few days.

Then Marie told Etiwee of what had transpired at the chief's lodge, knowing that the young Omaha was also destined for the chief's squaw. Together they sympathized; but Etiwee seemed preoccupied.

At length it came out. At first Marie listened with doubt and disinclination.

"Why you no run 'way den?" cried Etiwee, speaking in her broken English, the only way they could communicate.

"But where could I go? These are my people—I know no one else."

"Know me—me know you purty well."

"But you're a prisoner here—"

"You run—me run, too, plenty fast. You say so, we go—git off plenty easy. To-night burn pale-face—Cree he be heap busy—got no eyes fo' squaw. Slip off—fin' Blackbird; *den* be safe, keep safe," eagerly added Etiwee.

"But where would I go?" despondently.

"You part Injun—go 'long us. Omahas nice people, Blackbird big chief—love Etiwee awful heap—do 'most any t'ing she say. He fight fo' you, too. Den got plenty lodge fo' pretty sister. Mak' you heap glad. Den plenty nice braves dere—Omahas," and Etiwee laughed slyly.

"Never mind that part," and Marie laughed despite herself. "But do you think it could be done? Could we really escape from here—and the pursuit that would follow? And then you know they said that—that the Omaha was—"

"Dey say him dead—git killed in water—but dat plenty big lie," laughed Etiwee. "When fight out dere, Etiwee hear Blackbird's war-cry. Dead chief don't mek such noise—don't shoot arrow so straight like dat. No, Blackbird be 'live—he watch fo' chance to set his squaw free—he be sure see us when we run 'way. *Den* all right—he save us plenty quick," hastily added the woman, with a beautiful confidence in her chief.

"Then you think we would be welcome?"

"Know so—like rain in desert."

"Then I'll go—this night we will start. But alas! would that I could save that pale-face, as well!"

"He big brave—if don't know 'nough to keep scalp, den lose it. Dat right."

At this moment a long, wailing cry came from the edge of the forest, and looking from the lodge door, the two women beheld a number of warriors slowly approaching the village. They were the remains of the band that had attacked the trappers, and others that had joined their retreat.

The village was in a state of frightful confusion. The

braves told blood-curdling tales of the supernatural enemies that had confronted them, led by the spirit of the dead Omaha. Even Karawee put some credence in this story; and the Prophet proceeded with his incantations.

Presently he emerged from his lodge, and made known the fresh message from Wahcatunca. A sacrifice was demanded immediately.

Sam Grimes was condemned to be burnt at the stake!

Poor Sam! Beyond the reach of aid, he well realized that all indeed was over with him when the band came in from its fruitless attempt to secure the other whites and the implacable Omaha; and now, without dealing with the horrible orgies that followed, we draw the veil over his sacrifice. As a brave man should, he confronted his ferocious tormentors, and died after sufferings which none can contemplate without a shudder. Peace to his memory!

Through that afternoon Marie and Etiwee had concluded their plans of escape, and the former made all possible preparations to insure its success. She managed to secrete a quantity of dried meat, without being suspected by the wrinkled old hag, Sastarexy's squaw—though not Marie's grandmother.

But then it seemed that their hopes were doomed to be frustrated, since the village was surrounded by watchful braves, who would be sure to stop Etiwee, if not her companion. The Omaha, though, cheered Marie with a gleam of hope. Knowing the instincts of a true savage better, she believed that the scene of torture would gradually seduce them from their posts.

The torture began. Marie cowered in one corner of the hut, covering her eyes and ears to shut out the horribly significant sounds; Etiwee, on the contrary, however, stood in the doorway, curiously watching the scene. A true-born savage, she exulted in the dauntless demeanor of the pale-face, for, since an enemy of the Plain Crees, he was a friend of hers. And as the hours passed by without a sound of suffering from the victim, her admiration became enthusiastic, and she almost forgot the plan of escape, until recalled to it by a question from Marie.

To their joy they found that the guards had yielded to the temptation, and had joined the group round the torture-stake. And as their keeper, the hag, had also gone, they were left free to act.

Noiselessly leaving the lodge, they glided rapidly away taking good care to keep as well hidden by the lodges as possible, though it is doubtful if they would have attracted attention even had they proceeded direct for the forest the Crees were so entirely absorbed in their diabolical orgies.

Gradually the village was left behind, and the hills neared. Then Etiwee suddenly paused. In the gloom before them was indistinctly visible a human figure. With an angry cry it sprung toward them with drawn knife.

CHAPTER XI.

WOLF EAT DOG.

As may be imagined, Mitchell and Hall were overjoyed at the opportune appearance of Old Kit and the Omaha, for, though making their mark broad and deep upon the crowded mass of Crees, they must speedily have succumbed to mere weight of numbers. As it was, they escaped uninjured, not one of the savages having been able to force an entrance to the den.

Blackbird's knife was soon busy among the dead, and his girdle hung full of blood-dripping trophies. Old Kit carefully examined the weapons left upon the field of battle, discarding his bow and arrow for a tolerably good rifle. His regret at losing his own favorite rifle was partially appeased by finding one of his revolvers at the belt of a dead savage. Blackbird also selected a rifle, besides replenishing his quiver, now nearly exhausted.

"Will it be safe for us to remain here?" at length Fred inquired, a little anxiously.

"I reckon not—any way, it's best to be on the safe side.

Them imps *may* pick up courage enough to come back for another hack at us, though I act'illy b'lieve they think the chief's a spook. We'll hev to hunt another hole, I reckon."

Blackbird called Old Kit aside, and they conversed earnestly for several minutes. Duncan seemed to be displeased, and at length turned to his comrades.

"Boys, what think? The chief 'vises us to make tracks back to Fort Pitt, 'thout any delay, 'f we want to save our skelps. D' *you* say so?"

"And desert Sam without one attempt to save him? No!" hotly replied Mitchell and Alf, in a breath.

"Good! 'F you'd 'a' said *yes*, I'd 'a' walloped both o' ye fer dirty, sneakin' dogs. You hear, chief?"

"It is well. My white brothers are very brave. Blackbird is proud of them. Now listen. While light stays we can do nothing but hide. The Cree dogs will be hunting for us. Four braves make a broad trail. We will separate, and each one hide his head apart from the rest, until dark comes. Then we will meet at the foot of the black hill, yonder, and hold council."

"It's the best plan, chief, I believe," thoughtfully added Old Kit. "Then you think o' tryin' it on ag'in?"

"Etiwee looks and listens for the coming of her chief. She must not look in vain."

"You must think a heap more o' that squaw than Injuns gen'ally do, chief, to run sech resk fer her."

The eyes of Blackbird glowed brightly, and his face lighted up with a glorious smile. One hand was pressed to his heart with an ardor that surprised Old Kit. He could not comprehend such love in the breast of an Indian.

Each of the little party secured upon his person a quantity of dried meat, and then separated, fully understanding the time and place of rendezvous. Old Kit chose the very hill mentioned by Blackbird, which overlooked the Cree village; a secure cover, since from base to apex it was clothed with a dense mass of evergreen shrubs, beneath which an army might have lain undiscovered.

Secure in this thought, Old Kit lighted his pipe and composed himself for several hours' inactivity. But the soothing weed had lost its power, and the cherished pipe dropped un-

heeded to the ground. A sickening sensation seized upon him—a mist swam before his eyes, as he gazed out upon the Cree village.

He could not disguise the truth. He knew that a dread tragedy was about to be enacted before his very eyes, and one that he was powerless to avert.

He saw the death-stake planted and stripped of its bark. He saw the squaws and papposes gathering wood and flinging it in a circular pile around the post. All told him that a victim was to be tortured—and that victim? His heart sickened as he gasped Sam Grimes' name.

And then he saw the tall, straight form of his loved comrade led to the stake and stripped to the skin. He saw the face painted black, and heard the taunting cries and triumphant yells of the savages, as they anticipated their horrible feast.

He heard the loud reports of the powder-charged guns, and at each, his stout frame quivered in sympathy, great drops of perspiration standing upon his ghastly, distorted face. Those were horrible hours, nearly as full of torture to Old Kit as to Grimes.

More than once he started to his feet, clutching his rifle until it seemed as though his fingers would bury themselves in the iron, about to rush madly forward upon the demons who were torturing his friend. But then the utter folly of such a course prevented him.

He could effect no good. A hundred well-armed men could not have rescued the victim then. And so the old trapper remained in his covert, though could he have insured Yankee Sam's escape by offering up his own life, he would not have hesitated one moment, such was the deep and true friendship existing between the comrades.

Through all he watched the sickening details, his eyes dry and bloodshot, his face stern set and ghastly pale. Not an incident escaped him. Each fresh insult and act of torture was indelibly recorded in his heart and mind, together with a vow of deadly, thorough vengeance. By that deed the Plain Crees made themselves a bitter, relentless enemy, who afterward drank deep of their hearts' blood, until the mere mention of his name caused the boldest warrior to tremble in his heart.

The torture was protracted for hours. The sun gave place to the moon before it was ended.

Suddenly Old Kit started. Through the gathering gloom—though the sky was still red in the west—he saw a couple of human forms gliding across the snowy expanse, apparently headed for the hill upon whose side he crouched. They came from the village. That was sufficient. His eyes glowed with a horrible fire—his face became that of a very fiend as he drew the long knife from his belt, and ran his thumb along its keen edge. Now would he strike the first blow of the long list to follow.

Like a creeping panther he glided along through the dense bushes to head off the approaching figures. As they came nearer he could see that they were women, but that did not alter his resolve. He was wild, mad, burning with a demoniac hatred that naught but blood could quench.

The victims came nearer, and Old Kit chuckled with a fiendish joy. They seemed unconscious of the peril that threatened them.

At any other time the old trapper would have recognized them at once. But now he thought only of vengeance. The torture, still continued, of his loved comrade drove all other thoughts from his mind.

With a grating snarl, he sprung from his covert with uplifted knife, and clutched the foremost figure by the throat. It was Marie. Etiwee uttered a faint shriek of alarm.

A dark figure sprung forward like an arrow and clutched the uplifted arm, wrenching the glittering weapon from the madman's grasp. Then Old Kit was hurled heavily to the ground.

With cat-like activity he regained his feet, but paused before his assailant. It was the young chief, Blackbird, who stood before the trembling maidens, with drawn knife.

"Is the pale-face mad, that he seeks the blood of friends?" sharply demanded the Omaha, motioning Old Kit back.

"Fri'nds—they're Injuns—like them what is torturin' poor Sam over yonder."

"This is my squaw—the other is the maiden who gave you the knife that struck down Karawee, the Cree chief."

Old Kit brushed a hand across his damp brow, and stared

steadily at the women. Then the truth burst upon him, and his voice faltered as he spoke.

"I was plum crazy, I reckon, not to know ye, gal. But jist think what I've bin forced to look upon 'th my hands tied down. It blinded my eyes, an' I on'y knowed that you kem from the village yonder. God knows I wouldn't 'a' harmed one ha'r o' your heads ef I'd 'a' knowed who you was. I ax your pardon—it won't happen ag'in," muttered Old Kit, in hollow tones, so greatly different from his usual merry one, that even the heart of Blackbird was touched.

"Let it pass—I know you are a friend," hastily uttered Marie. "But it is dangerous remaining here. Our flight may be discovered at any moment."

While she spoke, Etiwee whispered a few words in the chief's ear. He took Marie by the hand and pressed it to his heart, saying, earnestly:

"You were kind to Etiwee—Blackbird now has another sister. He will die for you, if needs be."

"I thank you. I have no home, no people now," and Marie sighed as she glanced back toward the village.

"There is room in the Omaha village for another. You are Blackbird's sister now. But come—let us go."

Mitchell and Hall were found impatiently awaiting their comrades at the rendezvous, but 'twould take an eloquent pen to picture the astonishment of Fred on recognizing Marie, or his sensations, as he warmly pressed her little brown hand. And her words increased his pleasure, since he knew that they would be companions for some time.

"I have no people now—none but these, who have promised to be my brother and sister," she said, in answer to his eager look.

"Come—we must go. The trail is long before us, and the feet of squaws are little. The Cree dogs Will soon miss their flower, and will hunt us hard," briefly said Blackbird, as he struck out toward the cabin.

Old Kit paused and glanced back upon the village. The broad glare of the death-fire lighted up the scene. The doomed trapper was still upon his feet, spurred on in his monotonous walk by the fiery sticks.

Sinking upon his knees, Old Kit bared his head and raised

a clenched hand toward heaven. He did not speak aloud, but in his heart he recorded an oath of vengeance. Then he turned and followed after his friends.

Pausing at the cabin to procure furs and robes to protect themselves against the bitter cold, the little band of fugitives pressed on through the forest and hills until day-dawn. Then, while the women slept, a fire was kindled and some meat cooked.

But time was precious, and long before noon the fugitives were once more headed toward Fort Pitt, that being the nearest point of safety. The Crees well knew this, and should they discover the flight in time, would, without doubt, send off braves to intercept them.

Marie and Etiwee bore up bravely against cold and hunger.

Blackbird assisted his squaw, and Fred gladly performed the same service for Marie, finding his reward in her grateful glances and gently-spoken thanks. Already he was beginning to think of her as he had never before felt toward woman, and mentally decided that a bachelor's lot was not perfect, after all.

On the second day the crisis came. From the crest of a high hill, or range of hills, Blackbird first discovered that they were being pursued.

Though miles distant, he could distinguish a large body of footmen, and did not doubt that they were Plain Crees.

Flight was hopeless. The women were weak and worn. A broad, level plain lay before them, without shelter until the next hills were gained. And so the fugitives looked around for shelter.

Half-way down that hill they found it—a huge, square rock, with almost perpendicular sides, its top covered with a dense growth of evergreens. In these they might hope to lie concealed until the Crees were gone.

A lasso was quickly made from a buffalo-hide, and then its noose cast round a point of the rock. Blackbird scaled the rock, then Mitchell. Their strength sufficed to draw up the women in safety. When Old Kit and Hall followed, the rope was severed, and all crouched down in the bushes, a warm nest being found for the women.

A new surprise awaited them. The plain below was now occupied by Indian braves, who had come down from the further hills.

Eagerly Blackbird watched them. Evidently they had not observed the fugitives.

As the Crees gained the hilltop, the other party were nearly at its base. They were Blackfeet, having come to repay the late visit of their enemies.

It was wolf eat dog, for neither party was averse to meeting, being nearly the same strength.

With wild yells they rushed upon each other, fighting with desperate fury, augmented by a lifelong feud. And from the rock our friends observed it with no little anxiety. Old Kit could scarcely be restrained from firing upon the Crees, or cheering when he saw the Blackfeet gradually getting the better of it. And nothing but Marie's influence saved them from ruin. With her hand upon his arm, Old Kit restrained his passions.

For an hour the struggle raged and then the Blackfeet were victorious.

In dismay the few surviving Crees fled, hotly pursued by the victors. But these were also too greatly lessened to venture further into the enemies' country, and, loaded with scalps, they took the back trail in hot haste.

All that night our friends journeyed, reaching Fort Pitt at midday following, where they received a hearty welcome. For a week they tarried here, recruiting their strength for a further venture, as Blackbird was eager to rejoin his people.

With them went the three trappers, Fred, especially, with increasing hope—for he believed that his love was returned.

And before the Omaha village was reached, he learned his fate—a most joyous one, since Marie promised to be his wife.

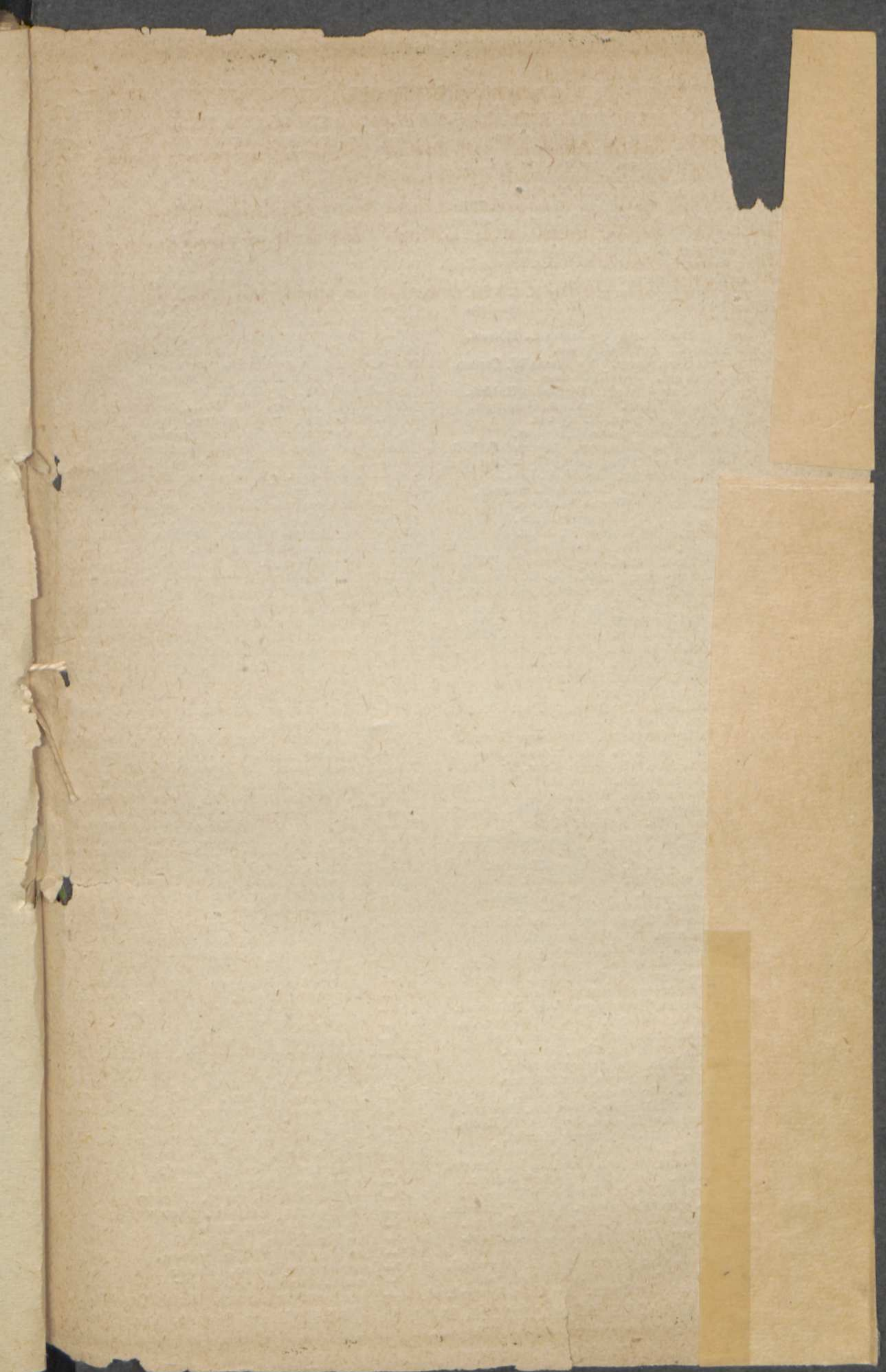
After a brief stay at Blackbird's village, the quartette departed, escorted to Omaha by the chief, his wife, and a body of chosen braves.

Fred was married to Marie, with his friends, both white and red around him. He now resides in Kansas, a prosperous

farmer, a happy husband and father, while Marie grows more beautiful and loving with every day.

Alfred Hall is also married, and lives adjoining Mitchell, both on "Government land," awarded for their services during the "late onpleasantness."

Of Old Kit, we may have occasion to speak hereafter.



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